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**Oral history interview with Rolando Briseño,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Rolando Briseño on March 16 & 26, 2004. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the *Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas*.

Rolando Briseño and Cary Cordova have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CARY CORDOVA: All right. We're recording, and this is Cary Cordova interviewing Rolando Briseño at his home at 1241 West French Place in San Antonio, Texas. And this is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session one and disc one. And, Rolando, if I could just start us off by just you telling me when and where you were born.

ROLANDO BRISEÑO: I was born here in San Antonio, January the 3rd, 1952.

MS. CORDOVA: Great. And where is your family from originally?

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay. Well, I come from a diverse background socially, because my mother's from Mexico. She was born in Zamora, Michoacan in 1911, which was the beginning of the revolution. And then after the revolution her mother brought her and her brother to San Antonio. I'm not exactly sure of the whole story, but from – the land that they had and the vestiges of their home that we've seen in Ixtlan de los Hervidores, a little town outside of Zamora. They were *hacendados* and so they had to leave the land. The rest of the extended family migrated to Mexico City except for my grandmother. I think it was an excuse to leave her husband, my grandfather, although no one ever spoke of this because they couldn't get divorced, they were so religious. They were very religious.

I have books of theirs in French on the saint's lives and all different sorts of weekly publications that it seems came out in the newspaper, some from Colombia or Venezuela. They were part of the bourgeoisie, so they had to at least read French. I have an actual menu from a dinner party that they had, and you can see the food that they ate. It was pretty fancy. My grandmother actually had money coming in – I mean, they did keep part of the land but most of it was expropriated, and so she rented the land, she was an absentee landlord who lived off of that money.

And then my father is Tejano. He's from here, from Texas. He was born in Atascosa County, which is the county just south of Bexar, in a little town that doesn't exist anymore. It was a little hamlet called Tobey. They had a ranch and farm over there. His mother, my grandmother, couldn't read or write; they were very poor. His father however, had the biggest house, for the Mexican community, in that area. It was a gathering place for people. Meetings would go on, political meetings, and they would host big parties like baptisms and things like that. They also had a cemetery. So kind of dirt poor but still kind of like a center for that county, within the *Tejano* community.

My father has a good story actually, of when women's suffrage was an issue. So that was in the

'20s right, '21, 1921?

MS. CORDOVA: 1920.

MR. BRISEÑO: My Dad's father, whom I never met, spoke in favor of women's right to vote. The meetings would be right there on their property. I guess on Sunday afternoon people would go. And my father had this speech memorized of what his father said, he talks about how the women really clapped real hard, "*tronaron las manos*", after my grandfather spoke.

I ended-up being very liberal, and I think that's the *Tejano* side, definitely not the *hacendado* side, you know, but at the same time I'm able to flow within both worlds. Like when we would go to Mexico City, they'd be talking about Chopin and caviar. I grew up with classical music because of my mother and experienced incredible food and table manners in Mexico City. And here, you know, Tejanos don't do that. However, my mother was a horrible cook. She hated it.

MS. CORDOVA: Your mother's a horrible cook?

MR. BRISEÑO: She was, yeah. They both passed away already. But she didn't like it, you know. Her mother ended up getting a stroke and she had to take care of her. And so my mother became her mother's servant. She grew up with four servants in the house, and all of a sudden they were here and it's American style with no servants, plus they didn't have enough money. So my mother kind of became her servant. Plus she had five kids. That's why she hated cooking. I don't blame her. She had to cook and serve five to eight people, three times a day.

She told my father before they got married, "*Si crees que voy a ser una de esas mujeres que te van a hacer tortillas recien hechas todos los dias, major no nos casamos.*" In other words, forget it, I'm not going to be making tortillas. So we were brought up on packaged tortillas. [Laughter.] I'd walk home from school smelling the homemade ones and they'd drive my crazy. I'm used to the packaged ones.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you ever make them yourself now?

MR. BRISEÑO: No. No, I never really made tortillas.

MS. CORDOVA: How often would you go back and forth to Mexico as a kid?

MR. BRISEÑO: Every summer for two weeks every August. We would mostly just go to *Saltillo* to escape the heat of San Antonio for two weeks. But then oftentimes we would go all the way to Mexico City and see our family and relatives and all that. And I ended up spending one summer there, and my sister went and spent a summer there, too. Twice, we went to the southwest and once to Hawaii to see my brother Charles who was doing his residency.

You know, as a kid I always wanted to go to California. I didn't want to go to Mexico. I hated Mexico, you know, because you were brought up here and you have this complex, because that's what they teach you. So I hated it. But I switched when I was 17. I suddenly realized the culture that's there, and I totally fell in love with Mexico and I completely changed. It was like a big total reversal in my life, which was a wonderful one.

MS. CORDOVA: What was the tipping point for that?

MR. BRISEÑO: I don't know. Well, because I like culture. You know, I'm totally into culture and in Mexico there's so much culture. I mean, my parents would take us basically to the old colonial churches, and we'd go to some museums in Mexico City and sightsee different things. So I think it

was that. And I also grew up with my uncle who lived across the street. My mother came here with her mother and brother and they lived across the street from each other, on the west side on Monterrey Street, in San Antonio. He had art books and he wore a coat and tie every day of his life like his father. And so I had this other experience, something else to look at besides the typical, you know, kid bought up in the barrio. I experienced both sides of the border and both sides of the economic ladder; it's interesting – so I think that was a big influence in my life.

And also, unfortunately, if you look at the successful Mexican-American families in San Antonio, you'll see that a lot of them came out of the revolution from Mexico, like Cisneros, Mungia, a lot of them. And then there's the 150 years of terrible oppression with lack of opportunity and access to power, like Jim Crow. From the very beginning of life under the US, even the best educational system that was offered to the Mexican-American was not enough to go to college. They were not expected to go to college.

So it was over 100 years of systematic oppression, that's what most Tejanos have experienced and you see the results today. You know, a 50 percent drop out rate, a horrible pregnancy rate, everybody's overweight, and it's just a disaster – and very uneducated, unfortunately. For me, it was having that other side just totally opened us up and, you know, everybody in my family makes money, went to college. But I call them hicks anyway – [laughter].

MS. CORDOVA: What part of San Antonio did you grow up in?

MR. BRISEÑO: The west side.

MS. CORDOVA: The west.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah. It used to be like the middle-class part of the west side. The neighborhood is called Prospect Hill. I grew up on Monterrey Street like Ricardo Romo, Henry Cisneros and Jesse Treviño. I don't know how middle class Jesse was because there were 12 kids and the father died. George Cisneros is an artist, too, you know. My cousin – Rita Maria Contreras is an artist, too. She lived right there. And then Roland Mazuca is an artist, too. There's a lot of art going on in Prospect Hill. It was a beautiful neighborhood when I was a kid, flowers everywhere. And now it has cars parked on lawns and it's kind of a disaster. Unfortunately, what can you do? [Laughter]?

MS. CORDOVA: What were your opportunities for learning about art?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I had a natural interest in that and so I always making something or painting, and my mother recognized that and sent me to art classes at the museum. The Witte Museum used to have the art – the only place in San Antonio besides the McNay that had art period. My cousins, Roland Mazuca, and myself went to art classes at the Witte. All of us from right there, from one block. We were the only Mexicans at the Witte Museum in the '60s, but we were taking art classes every Saturday, and we took over that park every Saturday. That was like our park, Brakenridge Park.

And so I had that opportunity. And then after that, since I went to a military Catholic high school that did not offer art, I went to Saturday classes with Jackie von Honts, who's a local artist who went to school in Mexico. And she actually was the one who taught me about the muralists and Mexican art.

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. BRISEÑO: Jackie von Honts was her name. She's still around.

MS. CORDOVA: That's right. And she was like a special tutor for you. Is that correct?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes, for me and others – she's still doing the same thing with a lot of Mexican-Americans. She has a tendency to attract those kids. You know, because her work looks like Siqueiros and Orozco. She teaches all these kids about murals. You always see her hanging around with Chicano teenagers. It's very nice. She's devoted her life to that. It's because she went to the Universidad de las Americas. For some reason (Mexico influenced the US art scene in the 30's, 40's and 50's) she just wound up there and loved it and totally became, you know, Mexicanized. There are a lot of people like that in San Antonio, a lot of Anglos that appreciate Mexico. I dropped out of art classes for one year, because of peer pressure. Art is not in with teenagers – or at least not my peers. What was in was the games and girls and all that, you know. That's all that's important, the right clothes and whatever. But thank God I changed. I left all of that. Thank God I left San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Did she help you sort of realize that cultivation of Mexico for you?

MR. BRISEÑO: Probably that was part of it. It was her influence and then the family I grew up in. We'd go to Mexico and my mother loved it. When I was young I thought Mexico was so dirty and all that, and I tried to be American, you know. But then later on I just realized how fabulous it was. Here in San Antonio we get excited about the missions but it's a little spattering of what Mexico has. It's like nothing. You know, and then the culture of the Native Americans in Mexico was incredibly developed – unbelievable. And in the United States it's a much lower level, mostly hunters and gatherers. But in Mexico they were pretty developed.

I love the ruins- we went to Teotihuacan and different pre-Columbian ruins. I loved it. And I loved the color and the churches and just the culture in general. I also got to see the very contemporary architecture of Mexico City. You know, my relatives were all interested in things like that. There are many architects in my family in Mexico, so there is an interest in design. So I think it was also an influence.

MS. CORDOVA: What was it like going to a Catholic military high school?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, my brothers went there too, and the thing is that if you grew up on the west side your high school was Lanier and did not offer the classes to go to college. It didn't offer a foreign language or calculus for example. And before my time, it only was a three year institution. It was totally geared to a vocational career. You hear this story over and over and over. People saying "I want to go to college" and the teachers would say, "No, no, you have to be a mechanic" or something like that. The highest paying jobs would be a policeman or work for the civil service. That's what helped get some Mexican-Americans off the ground, the federal government, not the state or the city, that's for sure. It was the federal government and the military.

We all went to Catholic high schools downtown. My father was a blue collar worker, a manager at a dairy. He worked his butt off to pay for the tuition. But since my mother knew what it was like and what it took to be bourgeois, they would scrimp and save and then buy houses. They owned five houses at one time. They would just get the down payment and then the rent would pay for the house. And that's how he paid for all of us to go to private school. We all went to Catholic grade school in the barrio too –we didn't go to the public school.

It was just expected of me to go to college. I knew nothing else. I never questioned whether I was going to college or not. That was going to happen, it was just part of my experience. I never even thought of not going. You know, and then I loved learning, so it was no problem I got a – I could

choose between scholarships, and I had one to the Kansas City Art Institute and the Cooper Union and some other place. I forgot where it was. Anyway, I chose the Cooper Union in New York because it was totally free – totally endowed. That's why I went.

MS. CORDOVA: And they gave you an entire scholarship.

MR. BRISEÑO: Everybody that goes to Cooper Union is on a scholarship. The whole school is a totally endowed school. But Jackie von Honts told me about that. How else would I have had heard about the Cooper Union? She told us about it. My parents, you know, had enough money and also the vision to fly us up there just to take the test. You know, things like that. Luckily my parents had that vision and wanted us to get educated.

And also when I was growing up, I was the last of five. So I was lucky that my parents were more middle-class. I think the '60s was a very good economic boom for the country, and that's when they became – was kind of like a more middle class. When I was a little kid, they'd buy like a six-pack of Cokes for the week and everybody would get one coke for the week. I would save mine and I had to put lines on it because my brother was fat and he'd go and drink it all. And then he'd change the line to fool me. So we have these family things like that, you know, from not having too much money. But when I was a teenager there was more – so I was really lucky that I got to go to The Cooper Union.

MS. CORDOVA: Were there any advantages or disadvantages to being the youngest in your family?

MR. BRISEÑO: When they all tried to tell me what to do, but I'd get out of it. But I was definitely the most spoiled, that's for sure. [Laughter.] Yeah, probably more advantages. I had my little household chores to do, but it was – I had hand-me-downs, you know, cars, clothes. I didn't like that.

MS. CORDOVA: And most –

MR. BRISEÑO: Everybody else left and I got to have my own room. I remember that. I was so happy when my brother left. [Laughs.] I had my own room.

MS. CORDOVA: That must have been exciting. [Laughter.] So there were four boys? Is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Four boys and one girl.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And what was that trip – was that the first time that you went to New York, that trip with your parents to take that test?

MR. BRISEÑO: I went by myself, me with a neighbor from across the street, one of those kids that I had art classes with, Roland Mazuca. So we went up there together. And my father had a sister who lived in Maplewood, New Jersey, and so we stayed with her actually, and she was very nice and took us in, and took us to take the test and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you traveled much by yourself before that?

MR. BRISEÑO: No. Well, the year before that I went to Mexico by myself – well, actually with teacher from Central, and Roland Mazuca, too. So we did that trip. I guess that was my most independent trip up to that point. But no, not much. I loved it, though. Since I was used to taking a vacation every year with my parents, it became natural that I would go on my own. I've done quite a bit of traveling since then.

MS. CORDOVA: And just to sort of back up for a second, you grew up speaking Spanish.

MR. BRISEÑO: My mother would speak to us in Spanish and I would answer in English. My father spoke American English like without a Spanish accent, but kind of like a country accent. Actually he spoke fluent Spanish, Tejano Spanish. My mother brought him up to date with proper Spanish. Tejanos use a lot of archaic words. So, yeah, that's another thing about the way we grew up, was the Spanish thing.

Yeah, we would notice if someone would say – asina, ansina, truje, those old words. And usually it kind of goes with poor, lower class speakers, so we always were very aware of class because of my mother. She brought me up and I used to hear comments and discussions between her and my father would have about – he would say, “You never liked poor people.” And she would say, “You're one of them and I married you didn't I?” and things like that. I was kind of like her. I mean, I have sacrificed my life a lot for helping the Tejanos and stuff like that. But I just don't have that much in common with some of them, to hang around with, you know, people who were uneducated. It's boring, that's all, unfortunately, but c'est la vie also. But, what else were you asking me about?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I was going to ask you, what did your father think of this desire to go to art school? Was he supportive?

MR. BRISEÑO: My father was so loving and he just wanted us to do whatever we wanted to do to be happy. He didn't care – whatever you want to do. It was like, you want to get divorced? He would say, I remember like three of my siblings are divorced, and he would say, “So you all agree to disagree?” He loved us so much he just wanted us to be happy. That's all. So, you know, he supported me.

He tried to take me hunting because he went hunting all the time, and I went for a few years. After I killed two bucks, that was it. I was a junior in high school. But I never went back, because to me it was just – I remember the first time I killed a deer, it was like I had to lie down on the ground and hug it because it was so beautiful. I felt so heartless. It was beautiful seven-point buck and I thought, oh, my God. And I had to hug it because I felt so weird. I had a sense of this is not for me; killing these beautiful animals. But my father taught me to love the countryside. I love the country.

My father always said that he was part Indian, and teach us different things like – I have a very good sense of orientation and things like that, and how to tell directions with the sun and I can spot animals. That was from him basically taking us hunting and fishing, which I don't do anymore. I've sort of turned into a total city person after 15 years in New York and two in Europe. But I go to the country and I like to walk around, you know, but I'm not going camping, that's out. [Laughter.] I've tried that, too. That is out. So even if we have real nice food, camping is like, nah. We try and stay in a hotel.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about religion. How strong is your religion?

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, religion. Okay, that's a good one. [Laughter.] Of course I was brought up Catholic.

MS. CORDOVA: But from both sides, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah. Actually my father – they were first of all Catholic and then the church closed down and he then started going to a Baptist – my father was kind of brought up Baptist. He was baptized Catholic but he was brought up as a Baptist. And his mother would say, no, no, it's terrible – you don't have to go –but his father said you have to get the word of God some place. So my

father would go to mass but he wouldn't go during hunting season. My father helped me actually see the truth about religion because he didn't believe in a lot of things. Like he did the way the Baptist do like your self-confession.

He said, "Every night before I go to bed." Yeah, right Dad. Anyway, but he wouldn't go to confession, he wouldn't go to communion. He would just go to mass to be with my mother, every Sunday. But then during hunting season, out, you know. So I thought that was really cool – [laughter] – and I was brought up – went to Catholic school for 12 years, and I always asked the same questions, like original sin, what does that – I couldn't understand that concept of this guilt, you know, and coming back from the dead and virgin births. I just never believed that.

When I went to Cooper Union, I met this Cubana, Melita del Villar, who was one of the biggest influences in my life. She helped me see the truth about what is Catholic Christianity, you know. All these paternalistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, you know. They are intolerant – self-righteous intolerance.

So I dropped that whole thing, and then while getting my first degree in art history, they kept on using the term "Christian mythology" and I said, that's exactly what it is: mythology. It's the same as – you know, Meso-American, Greek. It's the same thing, these virgin births and bodies going up to heaven, you know. If you're going to believe in them, you might as well believe that Athena came out of the thigh of Zeus fully dressed. It was like, same thing. I'm not saying that Jesus was bad, but just that all this stuff was invented afterwards.

I studied a lot and I continue to be very interested in religion also because it's a big part of culture. You know, people invent religion because they need it. God doesn't invent religion. So, well, I love to make fun of Christians, you know, and it's a good conversation for parties. No, people don't like it, they get a little nervous, but I don't care. And they need to think. My calling card says cultural adjuster because I think the cultural needs a lot of adjusting, and religion is one of them. I just think that it's used like nationalism, to control people. You know, and as Karl Marx said, it's the opium of the poor. Is that Oscar Wilde?

You know, he was like – you know, I totally rejected all of that big time – big time. And my mother – I would tell her the truth about what I thought, I'd tell everybody in my family. They're all still Catholics.

MS. CORDOVA: How did she respond?

MR. BRISEÑO: When I lived in Rome, she said, go to St. Peter's and – I lived down by St. Peter's – and pray that your faith is restored. I said, yeah right. On the way to St. Peter's I'm like flirting with all the priests, you know, with the nuns, make them feel bad or make them do bad things, commit sins, the most natural feeling, you know, sex. I would go to church to look at the art, you know? But as far as the dogmas – and I've read a lot about Buddhism and to me that's – if you have to get into an organized religion that – the value of it – Buddhism has no rituals, you know, it's like three things you say that you believe in, that's it.

And they are analytical – it has a lot to do with psychology. And they've had that since 700 BCE, they were going into the self and the subconscious and all of that. You know, it took us, the West, so much longer to get to that point. So that's the religion that I like the best. But I realize also I'm a Westerner and it's very difficult for Westerners to really get into truly be in an Eastern religion. But, yeah, I love making fun of religion. I think that people use it just to manipulate poor people mostly, and rich people feel guilty for having so much money and having screwed over so many poor people, that's why they are so religious, and I just think it's just a bunch of baloney.

I think that Christians are a bunch of hypocrites. They are the biggest hypocrites with these wars. I just find them so – and then the capital punishment. I just don't understand it. To me it doesn't make sense. It's illogical. That's what this – I can't understand how people think they – how can you believe that? I don't understand it. I just don't.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it sounds like you walked away pretty – [laughs.]

MR. BRISEÑO: There's no turning back, that's for sure. You know, some people refuse to believe me, because they think – because they see that I am spiritual in some ways with my art. Definitely, you know, humanist. I've been sick. You know, I've been real sick. I mean, I tried to call on the ancient Mexican gods but it just doesn't cut it for me, you know. So I do call the Catholic gods to – you know, when I'm really like sick, but I think that's just something that you do when you're in bad shape like that, you need something.

And one thing I do like about Catholics actually, as opposed to Protestants, is their love of the Virgin Mary, of Mother Earth – she is a continuation of the Mother Earth gods. And, see, I like religion when there was – made more sense to me when it was more directly correlated to reproduction and the cycles and Mother Earth and all that and made sense, and all villages were like that before, using archetypes. The Jews are the ones that separated from that and become paternalistic, and then out of that came Christianity – same thing – and then Islam – same thing – very paternalistic and forgetting the goddess, you know, which I think is more primary, more primordial, more natural.

I really like Native American religion, too, because it's nature-based and the concept of duality referring to all things, I think makes a lot of sense, and I wish that that would be taught to all American schoolchildren, because they need a little bit more, you know, culture – a cultural background, and also respect for the environment and for nature. Then I also like African religions, ancestral worship. I think that that's interesting, too. So I have a little spiritual center here and it has pictures of my ancestors and African, Hindu, and Christian gods. You know, all kinds mixed –up.

MS. CORDOVA: And about – you were just sort of going to Cooper Union or at Cooper Union really when you sort of felt yourself separating from the church?

MR. BRISEÑO: At Cooper Union, with Melita del Villar, that Cubana prof that I really became attached to.

MS. CORDOVA: And let me ask something about her, because you said she was such an important influence.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, she's the one who taught me – I mean who made me see all of this, and taught me a lot about Native American religion and just a general cultural overview of the world. And, I mean, I was there in New York thinking that Rockefeller was a hero and she told me the whole story. I mean I was basically uneducated. I was 18 years old. So I read all this stuff and, you know, had good conversations with professors and like I just totally changed. I came back to San Antonio after one semester.

My parents were going to the airport to pick me up – to receive me; all the way to the gate, you know, in those days. And my mother – I was coming off the ramp - in those days you had a ramp with stairs. My father said, "See that guy over there with the long hair? That's your son." She didn't recognize me.

So I came back as a hippie, right, but I was a socialist and agnostic. I had totally changed and I was feeling very good about it. And I would talk to my mother – she always spoke to all of us, all her kids,

about everything. And I'd tell her what I thought exactly, you know, and she couldn't believe some of the things I was saying and was trying to change my mind. But then they gave up because I always had an answer. I mean, I was like saying, how can you believe this? You know, a virgin birth, come on. Original sin, it's ridiculous. It's a trick – you're in the religion and then you have to keep coming back for absolution. I just thought original sin was a big one that I couldn't understand. And I also couldn't understand how Jesus dying saved us. Tell me again how that works. [Laughs.] I've always been that way.

MS. CORDOVA: What would – how would you describe your art education up until that point, up until Cooper Union? I mean, I know you took classes at the Witte Museum [San Antonio, Texas] and you had –

MR. BRISEÑO: I actually have a portfolio that I made that has little pictures from when I was a teenager of some art things that I made.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, basically I was very influenced by Jackie von Honts, and my work ended up looking like hers, which is kind of expressive and very Mexican, you know, expressive like the muralists. I painted a lot. You know, drew, painted all the time, I always did. I used to go to the McNay [Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas] and look at the art over there. They have a great impressionist collection. So I was exposed to art in Mexico and here, at the Witte where they had the Art League's collection upstairs. That's the only art museum besides the McNay that was in the city. And I'd go up there and I loved the paintings so much, you know.

I remember one time I had to touch the impasto on a painting and I pinched a little piece of it off. I felt so bad but it just got to me so much because I loved it so much, and I just had to have a little piece of it. So weird, right? I felt so bad that I did that. I still have guilt, right? But I took a little piece off one of the paintings because I had to. But it was great. We used to go there every Saturday. So my work was – I think because of Jackie Von Honts – was very Mexican and expressive.

MS. CORDOVA: And around this time at Cooper Union, at some point you spent a summer in Mexico at the university.

MR. BRISEÑO: Before I went to New York I had a scholarship to the UNAM [Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México]. See, if you had good grades, you got scholarships in those early '70s, late '60s, early '70s. That was great, so yeah, I got to go to UNAM for the summer. I stayed with my aunt and my cousins there. They lived right by the university. And that was a good experience.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you study there?

MR. BRISEÑO: Art – all art. Yeah. No, art and anthropology and archeology. Anthropology, I really liked that a lot. One time I wanted to change to anthropology major, and then I went back to art. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: What made you go back to art or leave anthropology?

MR. BRISEÑO: I just realized it was too scientific – too technical. I liked the expressive – more emotional –

MS. CORDOVA: What do you like about anthropology?

MR. BRISEÑO: I just like knowing the truth. I mean I love knowing where we come from, so I have read all that stuff and I find it really fascinating. I continue to keep up with it all. I think that everybody – senior year in high school, everybody should take anthropology. Humans don't even know who the hell they are. They still believe in Adam and Eve. You know, it's such ignorance. It's horrible.

You know, my Catholic high school that I went to was not so literal. They were pretty progressive. They didn't believe in it literally either. They'd tell us these stories are just metaphors. You know, essentially it was a pretty good school. A lot of these people – Henry Cisneros and a lot of people that went to Central are successful now. A lot of Mexican-Americans that are successful in San Antonio now went there – a lot. I don't hang out with them because they're too Catholic, but – and they don't buy art anyway. [Laughter].

MS. CORDOVA: And now you only stayed at Cooper Union for a couple of years. Is that right? Or was it –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes. I only studied there for a year and a half. Yeah, I kind of copied Roland Mazuca because he left. He was kind of having a harder time being separated from his family. You know, you can imagine going from a military Catholic school in San Antonio to The Cooper Union which is between East and West Village on 8th Street. One class – the drawing class was from 9:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night, and the whole afternoon like from 12:00 to 5:00, five hours – or from 1:00 to 5:00 I guess – or 6:00 – yeah, 5:00, was a life drawing class. And so they had a nude model, right. So one professor saved all the money for the nude models and had them all in one day. And the whole school was full of nude people.

That was great, you know, and lots of students took off their clothes, too. And then one time they were showing porno in the cafeteria, this guy, put it on, and the literature class was more about Zen Buddhism, you know, and this professor had this macrobiotic restaurant on the corner. So it was a very, very loose time and education was real – and so that kind of freaked us out. I mean, we turned down this apartment on Bleeker Street, which is like just a few blocks from Cooper Union, and we got one way the hell out. You had to take the subway to the end of the line to Coney Island and then take the bus to the end of the line to this gated Jewish community called Seagate. That's where we got an apartment. You know, it's like, oh, brother, this is dumb. But I think because we were scared of the city – well, Roland really was a lot. He was kind of freaked out by the city.

So we were all kind of freaked out there for a year – a year and a half, but then towards the end when I was already leaving, I totally fell in love with New York. I just started – I just loved it. It was so fabulous. And I always knew I was going to go back, but all the arrangements were already made for me to go to UT Austin. And that's when I switched to anthropology. I remember my painting professor at Cooper Union came and said, "You're doing so well. You're going to study anthropology, what, in Texas?" They couldn't believe Texas is where – they would ask me if there were still horses in the street – if the streets were paved and things like that.

Anyway, then I switched to – actually, I switched to art history in UT Austin, and I got that degree. I had such a thirst for learning I would go year-round just because I wanted to. And I got my first degree in three years in art history, and right after graduating I went to Europe for six months. I got another degree two years later. And then I took another trip. I studied abroad in Lima at La Pontifica del Peru [La Pontifica Universidad Católica del Peru] an exchange from UT Austin. And I lived with a family and studied art.

MS. CORDOVA: So you studied art in Lima?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, with Fernando de Szyszlo. He was an influence on me, too. And [Adolf] Winternitz, this Austrian professor. And it was good. It was good. Had a good time. Learned a lot.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you learn there?

MR. BRISEÑO: I was always learning different things. I was doing all these paintings of plants mostly, there were some Magueys outside. I had a little private – my own studio. So I painted those Magueys for a long time. Did a lot of photography at that time. I used to do photography. Mostly of the countryside and Indians, Peruvian culture. They're probably a little touristy.

With Fernando de Szyszlo I just remember the emotion and impact of his paintings, and – and I've been using the theme of tables for a long time and he had some tables. His forms looked like tables and like with condors kind of falling on them, but it's all abstracted you know. His work was very abstracted and very into that textured and kind of very melancholic and very fatalistic, and Peru kind of has that attitude. I remember that, and those moved me quite a bit – his work. And I think that that may – I mean formally, anyway for a while I think that some of the tables I did referred back to him and his way of abstracting them.

MS. CORDOVA: Though am I correct in – you didn't get to the sort of table setting image till you went to Columbia, is that correct?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: So a little bit of processing time.

MR. BRISEÑO: Right, because then at Columbia, with my last degree, you know, I was like finishing up and I think I was kind of scared about being an artist and just trying to live off my work. I went to college for nine years because they'd give you work study, you know, and a big studio and all that and still learning, learning, learning.

But in graduate school I was trying to decide, well, what is it exactly that I want to say? Here I am studying all this stuff, and I have a lot of emotion, and I see that in art students now. You have this incredible feeling that, you know, wanting to be an artist and you have so much energy, but I was just trying to be more specific as far as what is it that you want to say. So I looked at all my work and I pulled out the pieces that I liked the best and kind of saw what they had in common.

And I came up with the table as a locus for community. I grew up in a very tight family, we'd eat together two or three times a day every day. And then when I went to college I joined the real American society, and people didn't sit down together any more. Everybody's eating standing up or wouldn't have time.

And I remember that my Anglo friends would have cereal for dinner, you know, cold cereal – oh, brother. And I think it was a lot of those things and also I was brought up at a place where everybody always said hello, goodbye, and when anybody who was unknown came into the room they were introduced. And a lot of my friends would always go to my house, and my mother knew all my friends, and you always introduced.

I mean it was just totally normal for me. And with the Anglos, it's like they don't introduce. You know, the kids especially, they're like they're just there hanging out or pass by. Like my father would call them *burros sin mecate*. In Mexico, if the burro is not tied up they just go moving around eating, gnawing on the grass, and they're just hanging there, they don't care about you, they just pass by. You're not there.

And that's what he called mostly Anglos, but now of course the Mexican-Americans became so Americanized that they do that, too, now. You know, not say hello and goodbye or acknowledge the presence of another – it's just lack of respect, I mean, it hurts me still, probably because I'm so sensitive, right?

But, you know, you have to acknowledge the presence of another human being when they walk into the room, it's another sacred life form, you know, and respect it by just acknowledging their presence, that's all, instead of pretending that they're not there. So all of that, those feelings I think are what made me come to the table as this symbol of – you know, it goes back to my family and to my culture and also, you know, the table could be a feast table, you know, water table, different kinds of tables.

You know, you can do all kinds of things on tables. You can fight at the table. You can have harmony, you can meet, make love on the table. There are all kinds of things you can do on the table. So I just finally came up with that, and now I do drawings of groupings of people. I remember going back to more anthropological kind of – try and be primordial, and I can imagine this fire and these groupings and how religions developed and, you know, the shaman would start making shadows or saying that there's buffalo, whatever they ate, you know.

And doing the art, you know, on the walls, and making those first religions and extending the imagery of their necessities and making rituals around that. I think that the table can be like an altar, too, you know. So I just really developed that, abstracted it, I made wood tables, made them upside down, then I flattened them up on the wall with the legs sticking out in four directions.

And at that time minimalism was totally in, so there was no representational stuff – I mean, no figurative stuff. Still is unpopular in art schools, you know. But there was an artist, Lois Lane, that finally started putting some little bitty figures in her art – so I did, too. I started putting – but you couldn't draw them. It was bad to draw. And it was like, oh, brother. It was just fashion. The art world goes through fashion, too, so I cut out some images from magazines like the first little plates that went on these big tables. And the tables were so abstracted, I mean, that was okay, you know.

But then the other things, they started creeping in. As soon as I left graduate school, all that stuff came back from Jackie von Honts and all that stuff, and I totally went back to expressive art. And I had the tables, and then I just actually started drawing people, more realistic people around the tables. And then I used enamel paint and I thought that was the connection to like when you go to some of the taquerias around here on the west side in San Antonio and you see that they paint plates of food with enamel paint.

They're very good at doing that, very simple, very fast. And I love that, too, it's kind of Zen because it's done with like – like meditative. Okay, here's the plate, one perfect circle and the preparation to do it once, and that's it. And when it comes out, it comes out. You know, that process. And I think those images from the West side taquerias influenced me also, using the enamel paint and trying to do it like with one stroke, one thing at a time – really concentrating.

Well, that's one thing that Winternitz in Peru they taught me, you have everything in mind; you do the whole painting in your head – the whole thing. He said that's how he did it. And you save all this energy, and you have it all done, and all of a sudden just do it. And I did that for a long time. I think I still do that. I kind of like get everything ready, prepared, and then sort of like psych myself – you know, center myself and do it. So that's one thing they taught me in South America.

MS. CORDOVA: So, when you returned from Lima you went back to UT Austin, is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes. And that's when I got my second degree in art. The BA in painting, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And what was UT Austin like at that point for studying art?

MR. BRISEÑO: Same. It hasn't changed now, same thing. My niece goes there. I remember when I went there, it was 3.2 percent Mexican American. When, she went there a few years ago – the same damn thing. You know, it's outside the tortilla belt. The tortilla belt used to be end at Loop 410, now it's 1604, it just keeps expanding – [audio break, tape change] – I mean, to me the [Mexican] culture is the oldest and the basic Texas culture. And a lot of people just refuse to recognize that. I just feel the Anglos appropriated those things and totally made them their own, you know, mythologized their own thing but they exclude the Mexican part of it, but the root is really there. You know, cowboys, food, I mean, all this Texas food, its true root is Mexican.

Where would they be without the jalapeno? You know, so Austin was very un Mexican. I felt more at home in New York than in Austin.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, because the Anglo culture's so pervasive and so non-bending. So that's why I came back here in the end, because this is the geographical, cultural, Tejano capital, you know? I feel very happy and proud to be with that, and that's why I came back here.

But in Austin – I still feel that way. I mean, it's okay, you know, and I've been – Austin has been very good to me. I've been given big commissions. I've had personal shows and I've done a lot of stuff in Austin, ever so much. But I mean – and there's some good money there. And people know who I am in Austin. It's kind of like I've done Austin, you know?

Well, I like it, I have a good time, you know, now it's changed so much because there's a lot of good restaurants, and there weren't so many or maybe I had less money, too. [Laughs.] But it was good, I was the only Mexican American in my class, I mean, there were like none.

MS. CORDOVA: What years were that? It was the 1970s?

MR. BRISEÑO: I was there in '72, '73, or '74. And '75 was when I was in South America.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: I get mixed up. And then I think '76 when I got my second degree, the BA in painting. I learned some things from some people there.

MS. CORDOVA: Just thinking about those years, those were kind of the same years that – or maybe – but I'm thinking about like Santa Barraza who was also at UT Austin around that time.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I didn't see her. I think she was a little bit older.

MS. CORDOVA: She might be a little bit older than you.

MR. BRISEÑO: And then I went to New York.

MS. CORDOVA: And Sylvia Orozco maybe was there at the same time as you.

MR. BRISEÑO: She did studio art? Studied studio art?

MS. CORDOVA: I think so.

MR. BRISEÑO: They were not in my class.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm not suggesting that you –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, no, no.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm just curious because there was also I guess at that moment like Lincoln Juarez University was starting in Austin, so there was sort of this Mexican American university, and yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, see, I was like not that political. Before I was 17 I was a wannabe, I was like “Why do I have to be Mexican,” you know? I had this total complex that, you know, that I was white washed with. I didn't become political until I came back to San Antonio after living in New York. I mean, I was political in a very general way. I mean, I was protesting against the Shah and against the Vietnam War and I was very active politically in that way.

But as far as doing Chicano stuff and it was kind of like also it's just part of that complex of that not wanting to realize what I was. Because I didn't know anything about – Lincoln Juarez University. I didn't go – I guess there were other Mexican Americans – yeah, we didn't go to those – participate in those Mexican American activities and things like that. I mean, the group I hung out with was all from San Antonio and they were mostly Mexican Americans. But they were like me, we didn't – well, we were not that political. I was the most outspoken.

And you know, it's like – you see that sort of mentality here too, kind of like the Tejanos are identified as being poor, you know, uneducated and ignorant and, you know, fat and ugly and all this stuff. So they don't want to identify with that. I think my group also was kind of more middle class Mexican American – so I guess that's why we didn't hang around that Chicano stuff until later. When I was a kid we were afraid of *pachucos*, they had *fileros*. Now they are idealized by Chicano Art.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you call yourself Chicano?

MR. BRISEÑO: I did and do call myself Chicano. I'd have all these paintings from that time, my little wax things from like '74. I remember because the wax I bought in Spain. But they were like *Chicano on the Moon*, because I thought, hey, why are they – because I didn't have the experience of like picking lettuce or picking cotton or anything like that. You know, that was not part of my life growing up.

And so I did *Chicano on the Moon*. I wanted to like go up, go to outer space. You know, that was my idea. Let's get out of the barrio and quit dwelling on the *pobresito* thing. Let's get out there, get economic equity, which I still think is what we need. And that's what I think everybody really is striving for. That's why I make the statements people may not understand when I say bourgeois is good, you know? They freak out, you know.

I tell people from the Esperanza that but what I mean is that's what we're striving for – fighting for our education. It all goes to making more money, come on, get real. That's what it's for. So I just call it economic equity. And I think that's what we are striving for. So I guess that's why – I don't know – I break from the real radicals, you know? I mean I believe all the rhetoric. I voted for the Raza Unida Party.

I understand the lingo and all that, it's just not part of my life, the way I live. I live to eat fabulous

food. I eat food from all over the world, you know. I'm not only eating frijoles and tortillas, you know. I eat that, too, but my experience has been very expansive. And I like all those things, I include everything.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, now, we've got to get to the food because that's so notorious and where did this passion and love for food come from?

MR. BRISEÑO: I don't know, one of my relatives in Mexico has a cookbook I could show you. My mother cooked very basic, you know. I grew up on steak. It was like because it was easy, I got sick of it. My mother didn't like to cook, that's why. But I don't know. Well, I certainly remember the food of Mexico City at my relative's house. That was a big impression because they ate *comida corrida* everyday, the way everybody does in Mexico. Even the working class people have that.

Soup first and then the rice on another plate, you know, French influence. And the *guiso* [ph] on one plate with – it's a very small amount of meat with a lot of sauce. And then on another plate are the beans, right? And the other plate is a dessert. Every day for lunch. I loved it. When I was a kid they'd serve us on the same plate, and I would complain because the sauce from the *guiso* would go on the beans and the rice, you know, so they had to put like a fork under my plate so that it was on a slight angle so that the sauces wouldn't get mixed up.

I remember that as a kid. I was spoiled rotten – [laughs] – I don't know. I was just quoted in the paper two weeks ago about when you get older – I mean, when you're young sex is very important, you know, but when you get older food takes over – [laughs]. But I – I think it's true. I mean, I don't know why I just got so interested, but I do like it. I always have, and I like the – again, it's the table. The ritual – I use that term, the ritual of the table. And to me, I like all those, the proper etiquette things like the fork facing the right way and the knife the right way and then all that stuff. And then in Europe I expanded on how to eat – the proper way to eat with a fork and knife, you know.

And to me, it came totally naturally. You know, and I just – I don't know. Just bourgeois pretentious, but I love it, I don't care. I don't care about those things, I just do what feels good to me and eating good food on separate plates feels good – [laughs].

I hate it when I put everything on the same plate, because everything on one plate – you can't taste each thing properly. You know, I hate salad on the same plate so I don't eat that – at all. I like it on a separate plate afterwards. So I have my little – I don't know, I just – my cousin and I, we're very particular.

My whole family – my whole family will go to a restaurant and, you know, sometimes they don't give you a knife, so first I ask for a knife because you cannot eat without a knife. My mother taught us how to eat with a fork and knife, so if I go to a place that only gives you a fork I'm kind of like aye, aye, aye. It's like [inaudible]. I hate it. But, you know, what can you do? Ask for a knife. We always do – all of us – a knife please.

MS. CORDOVA: And what were meals like with your family growing up? Did you have a specific place where you sat?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did everyone sit?

MR. BRISEÑO: It was a big table with my grandmother and all my – by the time I was born my oldest brother was gone already. But, there were five, seven of us at the table. Yeah, my job was to make

the Kool-Aid. And then my mother would be at the – after she cooked and everything, set the table and it was kind of like, *por favor*, would you put this on the table? Just too many kids and too much work. I don't blame her.

But she'd be pitching the hot tortillas from the stove to the table, and then my grandmother if you were slow she'd take your tortilla – like gone. [Laughter] It was great to grow up with her, but because she grew up so rich she didn't care about anything. She would tell the nastiest jokes, especially to other rich people. Her relatives and friends came from Mexico. They're all up-tight – wearing ascots, you know, and I'd be like staring at them because they looked so different from what I was used to seeing. And then she'd tell these terrible jokes, like really nasty jokes. And I'd watch these ladies turn different shades of colors and things like that, and she loved doing that.

And my father liked doing things like that, too. They got along very well. And she didn't seem to care about his class or anything like that. Well, she lived with us. I mean, he kind of supported her, I suppose.

MS. CORDOVA: Was she an important influence on you then?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I think so. She would – she only knew how to make pastries. She didn't know how to cook, because she had a cook. So she could only do pastries for fun. So – I'd beg her “Oh let's make *bigotes*–” she'd make things like – they were – *arroz de leche* rolled in *canela* and I found a recipe for it from a cookbook from Michoacan. I looked it up and found the *bigotes*. Of course I haven't made it yet, too much trouble.

But she would make that, and she'd make these other little different kinds of cookies and pastries, and that's all she knew how to make. I would be her assistant– “Oh make these things.” She always spoke Spanish. You know, she read in French but she only spoke Spanish. She was always reading.

MS. CORDOVA: And did you have to talk to her in Spanish?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I spoke to her in Spanish. I knew Spanish in my mind because of her. My mother always spoke to me in Spanish, but I would answer in English. My mother had a very big vocabulary in English because she read, you know, – compared to the neighborhood. She always had a bigger vocabulary than most, even the white people who lived around there. The reason why I always wanted to go to school in Mexico was I wanted to be able to abstract my thoughts and be able to speak abstractly and intellectually in Spanish.

And that's why I went to UNAM and La Católica – that was my goal. And to really think in Spanish and not be so *agringado* – you know, Americanized. I had a horrible accent, and I couldn't even pronounce my name properly, you know, it was horrible. I felt so stupid. So I had to – this was my goal, I had to go and I'm going to learn Spanish, I'm going to speak it like I speak English. Which I haven't accomplished, but almost.

And same thing, almost, with Italian, just a lower level. I did that, I had to learn Italian because I wanted to be able to make fun of the Anglos that didn't speak Spanish in south Texas. I think all intellectual and intelligent people should speak more than one language, and here it has to be Spanish. People who don't speak Spanish are not part of the intelligentsia, you just need to tell that to them. To the – Anglos – that think they're in charge, you know? They used to actually believe that speaking one language is better than speaking two! When in reality, the only thing that's better than speaking two languages, is speaking three!

A lot of Anglos do speak Spanish, you know. You cannot speak in Spanish about them in public because a lot of them speak Spanish, you'd be surprised. I learned that lesson.

[Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, you learned that lesson?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you learn that lesson?

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, I don't remember, just really being embarrassed when you're speaking Spanish about somebody publicly. And then you go up to the counter and they're speaking Spanish. But some look like Anglos and they're not. You can't do that down here.

MS. CORDOVA: What made you – after coming back to UT Austin and getting your degree, how long were you here in Texas before you decided to go back to New York?

MR. BRISEÑO: I went back in – when did I graduate? I went back in '77. Because I stayed from – when did I come back, '71? I was going to say a long time. I guess I was here from the middle of '71 to – I think it's about the middle of '77. Six years.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: But I was going to school the whole time.

MS. CORDOVA: The whole time?

MR. BRISEÑO: Probably there was like one or two semesters I took off, round about.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did you find out about the program at Columbia?

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, well, I knew New York already and when I went to Europe I passed through New York again. – I went to Europe for six months after I graduated the first time. I went for six months and spent \$1,200 in six months from San Antonio – round trip – it was \$200 from New York to – on Icelandic and I hitchhiked everywhere in those days. You didn't even have to stick out your thumb, they'd pick you up in Holland, you know. It was incredible. I went to 18 countries.

I went over to Morocco, I went to Turkey, I went to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Denmark, England, and everything in between. I had a great time, definitely one of my highlights. And you know, when you're traveling you learn so much, too. And I just had received my degree in art history with honors so I knew all this stuff so I wanted to go see it. It was great, it was really nice.

So that was six months after when I didn't go to official school. But I always would go – and I went – so every time I'd go through New York I'd hang around for a while, because I already knew it and I had friends there. So I used to go to New York and I knew I was going to go back. I couldn't stand it here. I went to UTSA [University of Texas at San Antonio] before they built the school, before they even had the campus, and it was just too like clean, everything was too clean over there.

It was in the suburbs and too manicured, too homogeneous, you know. And there's the whole political thing about why they even put UTSA where the hell it is, you know, way over there, instead of downtown, pissed me off big time. You know, because I watched that whole fight and read about

it. I've always kept up with current events and I know what's going on, you know. But that just pissed me off.

So after they built the campus I went over there and I went to school and I couldn't take it. So I said, I'm getting the hell out of here. I can't stand it. I couldn't stand the racism and the things that were so subtle, you know, so – and then the Mexican American thing is like a non-issue all the time. It pisses me off. I mean it is an issue. It's a burning issue. It doesn't even come up. Now they're barely starting to see the Mexican American point of view about Alamo for the first time ever.

And it just pisses me off. And everybody – and then the bourgeois Mexican Americans, well, they don't want to talk about that, you know, Hispanic, it's not – they don't want to talk about those issues. I want to talk about the nitty-gritty issues, because as I said, they're so important. And so I'm active with Esperanza. I'm very political – [laughter] – beyond political

MS. CORDOVA: When do you feel you became political? Like when did you feel that?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, my father was very political, and my mother would tell me things like – all of us, the five of us in grade school, look what they're saying about the Mexicans – destroyed the Alamo, she would say, *No te crees, son puras mentiras* – because she was educated, you know, in Mexico. Other kids, imagine what their parents tell them? They believe that, too. It's like, aye, aye, aye. So, then I would realize – she would tell us, the reason why they did this is because they wanted to bring the slaves back.

She would tell us the truth, they just came to get land, you know. And I've always read about it. It pisses me off, you know. I want to get this straight, the whole story straight, – there's still stuff coming out about it, you know? So I read all that stuff. So I had the foundation with my parents, and they always attended rallies at my uncle's across the street who would do fundraisers for politicians. He had a pretty big yard there. It's now – renovated now that house.

And all these political functions, church functions, there was always parties going on, a very social family. And I think it was that. It's just the training. My parents were always involved in my school and in the community, you know, so I'm the same way. I go to neighborhood meetings and I'm very involved not just in the local level but many levels. And then after hanging out with Melita, she was very political. She taught me what's going on, and she showed it to me, and how the law is all for the rich people, and a bunch of baloney. It's the same thing now. So I've always been very political, more than ever now. Now I have money and I like to give a little bit to what I believe in.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, that makes me think New York was also maybe a place where you could meet more Latinos than just Mexican-Americans.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, that happened later on at Columbia actually. Well, not at Columbia, because at Columbia there were very few also, but just in New York. But in New York I got to hang out with people from all over the world. I had Chinese friends, I had Puerto Rican friends. It was the first time I hung around with African-Americans, you know. I totally fell in love with African-American culture. Before I didn't know anything about it and I was kind of racist. My mother became racist. My mother was bourgeois from Mexico, and of course there weren't any blacks left. But they had Indians, right? So she projected that onto blacks here.

One time I dated this black woman. And she told me “Why are you dating a black person? Mexicans are low enough.” And I was like, what are you talking about? What is this complex you have? So I had this weird thing with blacks, too, and I was kind of scared of them. But I got to know African-

Americans, and I became very good friends. I totally got into the culture. I love jazz and I had a lot of African-American friends, and I really like African Americans a lot. I mean, perhaps even more than whites. You know, like the sexual preferences you have. Everybody has them, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. Speaking of sexual preferences or sexual orientation, when did you come out? I mean –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, pretty late, when my mother died, because they're so conservative. And my mother told me one time, I remember – she had to know, right. Anyway, she said, "Thank God you're not a dancer." You know, she wanted me to be an architect. But one time she said, "At least you're not a dancer." But it took a long time because of the conservative part of my family and the Mexican-American things in those days. I mean, it was so repressed. I suffered a lot under my brothers. So I always had girlfriends. The girls would come to me. I never did anything. In high school they knew who I was taking to the prom before me.

Then, you know, and also when you get older you start having sex, you know. It still worked, it functioned, but then in Italy – it was 1985 right. All of a sudden, it just didn't work anymore, so I said, this is it. Because I kept on waiting for it to go away. I was thinking it's an adolescent thing. And, you know, when you're young you don't know exactly what to look for, what your feelings should be, because it's just these feelings that you have, and you think this is what everybody else has, or I don't know.

So I was in Italy when I finally said, okay this is it. I guess I just had to really accept it. Before I always thought, okay, I'm bisexual. I'm a bisexual man. And I would tell all the girls that, too. And, of course, they thought they were going to change me. It didn't work. It's not going to happen, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you kind of wish that they would?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I think, yeah. Yeah, because I don't think any homosexuals – you know, especially when you're young, you don't choose to be something that's so rejected, so hated by everyone. I mean, everybody else makes fun of you. My brothers made fun of me for being effeminate, for not being good at sports, you know, whatever. And I suffered my whole life, it was like time to play in the teams, I called them – oh, God, horror. I was always the last to be chosen. It was horrible. I didn't like it, you know. I thought it would go away.

[Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: When I was a kid I wanted the house to be real nice and I was always like into typical gay things – into decorating the house. So I put perfume all over the table and I ruined it. So it still has those perfume marks. This will come off. I just have to get the oil into it. I don't know what that is? It's real weird. I mean, it does go away.

MS. CORDOVA: All right. Well, I'll let you do it – I just was having a momentary heart failure, hurting your table. [Laughs.] It's a pretty beautiful table.

MR. BRISEÑO: It is.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. Okay. Right. I didn't mean to pause it. Right, are you ready to keep –

MR. BRISEÑO: Sure.

MS. CORDOVA: You know what, this tape is almost over, so let me switch tapes. [Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Rolando Briseño. This is session one and disc two. And, Rolando, we were just sort of I guess in the middle of you coming to terms with your sexuality, I guess, in Rome.

MR. BRISEÑO: Uh-huh. Yeah, in Italy. Yeah, just, I mean, even over there I had girlfriends and everything, but I also had boyfriends. I would tell them, you know. But it's just – that's when it finally – when I finally realized that, you know what, this is like – forget it. It's just not going to work anymore, and just have to admit that you're homosexual, that's it. You have to just deal with it. Yeah, so it was very hard for me, coming from a Catholic military high school.

And my upbringing was very conservative. But I finally said, what the hell. What can you do right? You've got to just accept it and that's – also to live in peace, mainly your inner peace helped me with that tremendously. I mean trying to live a fake life was horrible, horrible, you know, and then getting nervous if anything like that ever comes up, you know. And then I just didn't – you know, then I just wanted to be around – you know, have a boyfriend more than a girlfriend at that point, so then what are you going to do in public, you know? And I came out to my mother in death and everybody else.

Before, I had this girlfriend, Marina. She was born in Milano, an Italian and we lived – bought a building together. We lived together for almost seven years. I met her at Columbia. I told her from the beginning, you know, I'm with everybody – bisexual. They always think they're going to change you. But she thought that this was old-fashioned because when she was in high school in New York everybody was bisexual because it was fashionable. She thought, okay, he's from Texas. They're behind by 10 years, so he still is into that fashion and that's what she thought. But anyway, then it didn't work anymore. So, you know, ever since then, it's just one boy after another – no. No, I've been with Angel for over 12 years, so –

MS. CORDOVA: And, yeah, so let's go back for a second and – what was the training like at Columbia for you? What was –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, the cool thing about Columbia was that you had a big studio, like about this size – like my studio – all for myself. And we were in the building where the Manhattan project was. You know, they had these signs like, Don't go past this point. Radiation. Of course, we went in there and there was like a pit – it went from the fourth floor down to the first floor and we were there. But what I liked about it was the space and then all – not so much the professors that were there but we had a constant flow of visiting artists from New York. So obviously, the famous artists that you would read about would come and you'd get to meet them and talk to them. And many of them came to our world that way. So that was really cool. I ended up as Joel Shapiro's assistant because I met him at Columbia and a lot of different people. That's where I met Pedro Lujan, who is an artist in New York from El Paso. He and his companion, Leah Gitter, are great friends and we still travel together in Mexico every year. Pedro has been a great influence on my thinking. Actually it was a great way to get into the art world in New York.

MS. CORDOVA: Was there anyone in particular that you feel really influenced you there?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I went to the galleries and saw all the stuff that was going on. I mean I had to go back to what my feelings were and my experiences when I made my art and so it was pretty different from what else was going on except for that brief period when neo-expressionism became popular in New York in the '80s and that was kind of like when I – my career – did very well at that point. But after it went back to the restrictiveness, I just think that American art is so protestant. I mean, it's so restrictive. I think that's what minimalism comes from.

And it's not all my ideas, it's Eleanor Hartney's, an art critic, I got that from her. You know, she was saying you could say that minimalism is a Protestant movement. I said, you know what? You are right. And my culture is still Catholic and being Latino I have more of a baroque sensibility. You know, and expressive. Emotion is not seen as something pejorative and with this other work – it's like non-emotional. You know, affect is out. And expressionism is out. It has to be like total function makes form, but to the point where conceptualism has to be boring as a part of the prerequisite. That's why I stopped going to ArtPace. It's just I find stuff so boring. It just does not attract me at all.

I am kind of like in between those two worlds, the Chicano art world and mainstream because I do some stuff that's kind of in between, you know. But I just didn't really fit in. I didn't really fit in. That's part of the reason why I left, too. I was there for a long time. There was also a whole Latino group that I was really involved with in New York. But –

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. BRISEÑO: I mean, most of my friends have ended up being Latinos from all over the world: Colombia, Venezuela, you know, Mexico, Central Americas, Brazilians, Chilenos, Argentinos, all the Latinos. And I had friends from France and all over the world. You know, Africans. I mean, everybody. It was great. But the regular art world was – that stuff they showed at the Whitney, it's just too boring. Basically, it's like the number one sin. Boredom, it's like, oh my god, a waste of time. I'd be looking at the stuff that leaves me cold. It tells me nothing. And for a while, even content was out. I just thought it was so absurd, you know. Still, in the art school, that's how the kids are taught. I asked people from UTSA one time on a show, what's the content? Can you talk a little bit about the content? He says – they get confused and like, "oh well, really there is no content." I'm like, oh brother. No wonder why I can't understand it, there's nothing there. And that's a lot of stuff that's like that. And that's the trend with those artists from all over the world that follow the lead of the technological societies.

And I guess because I'm Chicano, I feel there's so much at stake in society, because I just see all the repression and the results of it. And I think that artists have to be involved in those things. How can you be in San Antonio making art about nothing when there's all these societal problems at stake. We have too much at stake. We have too many stories to tell. We haven't told our stories yet, you know. I believe we should tell them in new ways. I think it's really boring to do the same thing over and over again and paint *monitos* or paint little representational things. I mean, *Guadalupanas* and Aztec calendars. There are enough of those. You know, do it a totally new way.

And straight representation is not that interesting to me either. You know, I like it when the form is innovative and when there's a new approach, what I try to do a lot of times is mix Mexican mythology with something contemporary. But I just feel I didn't fit in and I still don't. I feel like I'm totally on my own here. I just stopped going to ArtPace. I was nominated six times, never got it. You know, and – Angel got it. You see, what happens at ArtPace is that it's the person choosing the choosers. They keep on choosing people who only like all that conceptual stuff, so I'm not going to get it. I'm too representational. I'm still old-fashioned to them. You know, so that's what's happened. And, you know, I just stopped going. It's too boring – stressful. Can you believe that Katherine Kanjo actually said on TV that a piece there at ArtPace wasn't about anything!

MS. CORDOVA: Now – Angel's – work is also representational. I mean –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes, he is. I think he got it because [Thelma] Goldman, an African-American was on the panel with a lot of other people – you know, when they first started out at ArtPace, they would have like a dozen or nine panelists, there's a better chance. And they could have a discussion there

and start talking. You know, if one of them believes the way I do, but if they're – I don't know if it's Kathryn Kanjo [Executive Director of ArtPace] or if it's Linda herself who chooses who's the one person to choose. But they're always from that bent.

And I think that some conceptual work – like all genres, there are some things that move me, that can be really strong, and they do say something, you know, but sometimes it's just about nothing, or it's kind of like, who cares what they're doing? It's like, go see a shrink, you know, if you have a problem or something like that, and I hate that. I'm much more interested in larger things, you know, like society in general. I mean, what is art for? It's about people. It's for reflection of people. How can you take the figure out of it? That's what they teach at UTSA.

You know, Constance Lowe? She's in charge of painting. She hates the figure. She makes – they have to do figure-life drawing because it's required, and she makes them wear clothes. And she tells – she made the statement that the figure is a cliché in art. Art is about us, about – it's a reflection of people. People need it. And so it has to have a reflection of the figure, I think. I mean – I think it's like, oh, my God, very Protestant and very restrictive. It's totally like – it's so uptight. It's like no emotion, you know, that whole thing. I just find it really Anglo. And I'm not interested. It's just too boring for me, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever have it from the other side where you were feeling, especially I guess in the mid '80s or early '90s, where your work was supposed to be very Latino or very –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, it's always kind of that way. See, I – a lot of times I don't fit into the – I don't get put into those shows because my work is not Latino enough. So that's the weird, stupid thing. Like, will the real Chicano please stand up, you know. It's like, oh God, it's like what do you have to do, you know? Then I see these people who are like so Chicano, some have never been to Mexico and don't speak Spanish. To me it does matter. I mean there are different levels of assimilation, of course. We live here; it makes sense. Well, they've had different experiences.

I understand how some people did not grow up that way, maybe their parents were very assimilated, they grew up in the suburbs, and like all my family and a lot of people I know and maybe they are totally un-Latino – [inaudible] – whereas it comes out anyway in some way, in the food, or emotions - it somehow comes out. But a lot of – but there's different degrees of it, and I understand that, that's fine. But if they're over there like, you know, Chicano this, Chicano that, everything's Chicano, and they don't even speak Spanish, I find that so weird. They've never been to Mexico.

They really need to go to Mexico and Europe and travel the world to see how American they are. That's what I found out when I lived in Europe and I was dying to come back because I was so American. I mean, the way we think. We're educated here, we think like Americans, we are Americans. And then a lot of Chicanos don't realize this and they are still in *la revolucion* – that's a bunch of baloney. Too much Mexican-American blood has been spilled for this country, there's no going back at all. And most people don't want to go back because they would be very poor over there and they're all used to the money over here and – it's been too long.

So that's, all that rhetoric, revolutionary rhetoric, believe it or not still exists here and I hear it and I go oh, my God. So I tell them. You know, I'm not embarrassed because I can have a discussion with them and I think it's important to, you know, because most people don't say anything about anything. *El Mexicano nunca dice nada - nada pasa hasta que pasa*. That's part of our Indian background that we just don't say anything until really – and then the whites don't want to talk about it either, it's a Southern polite way to be. So all those things are a non-issue. Americans don't want to talk about anything that would make them look bad.

Of course they think that they're not racist, you know, but they are – most – I used to always think the opposite. Give the white people the benefit of the doubt and think that they're not racist, that they thought a little more, like a little more inclusive and understand what's going on, acknowledge the history, but they don't. They don't care about history. They don't know the history they think it's a waste of time. They want to know about now. And to them the playing field is equal. I mean, when anyone ever uses that reverse discrimination baloney thing – there's no such thing as reverse discrimination because to have discrimination we have to have power over the other one.

I mean, if you look at where the money is at, it's not with the Latino community – not with the Mexican-American community. There's a few people that are rich and many that are middle class, but the vast majority are still poor. And I think those are such important issues and a lot of white people don't care, it's a non-issue. They don't live in the *barrio*, it's out of sight, out of mind. It's a non-issue with them. You think they're your friend and understand the situation and sympathize with you but, all of a sudden they make these statements – I mean, last year I was just told to go back to Mexico by this educated person, Larry Liesner, who just graduated from UTSA in the art department and he's older than me. He used to tell me all kinds of stuff about what goes on at UTSA like, Professor Binks saying that UTSA's problems came from its proximity to Mexico.

You know, Linda Pace has a birthday party for her mother at the museum every year. They invite everybody and I've gone. Larry asked, "Are we going to Linda Pace's mother's birthday?" I said, "No, I'm not going to go to a racist's birthday party. That's when he told me to go back to Mexico. But the reason I said that is because I heard this story, this is at a board meeting there, that she kept on saying, "Why does everything in the museum have to be so Mexican? Everything we do in San Antonio is so Mexican. Why does it have to be? If we keep doing everything Mexican we're never going to be known as a world class, internationally important museum"? And then they – and she's like – a real *viejita* – and can't hear very well and for the first time there was a Mexican on the board but she forgot, right. They kept on trying to tell her, you know there's a Mexican here. They finally had to holler to her "There's a Mexican here" for her to be quiet. And I heard this because the Mexican told me.

I'm sure that stuff goes on all the time. This is just a little drop in the bucket. And I've realized the truth of the matter now, so now it's the opposite. I assume that they're racist until they prove to me that they're not. That's how in my 52 years of living that's what I've experienced. I've had many friends, friends I've had for 10 years, And all of a sudden they make this statement. You say, like, where are they coming from? You can't believe it. One Anglo friend told me " I'm sick and tired of you Latinos blaming all of your problems on white people." I'm like, oh my God, after all of the discussions we've had. Experience has taught me over and over, so now – when I was a kid I always wondered how come my parents didn't have Anglo friends, you know, almost all their friends were Mexican and that's so weird. I always thought that was so weird, you know. And now I realize why. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Did you experience as much or were you aware as much of discrimination when you were living in New York? Was that –

MR. BRISEÑO: I think that in New York people don't give a damn where you come from. In Brooklyn they do because it's more working class. I always ended up in those working class neighborhoods because that's what I could afford. So the Italians would always tell me – I was in an Italian neighborhood – "Are you Spanish or Italian?" I'd go "Chicano," and they'd go "Oh, Chicago, okay." I felt like telling them I speak Spanish and Italian but I'm neither. Most didn't speak Italian any more, but some spoke Neopolitan or Sicilian. But it was hilarious.

No but in New York the whole world is there and that's the liberating thing about New York, it doesn't matter if you're Chicano or what. Those things are gone there, it's just so – you know, black and white or Mexican and white, really it gets boring but that's how it is. Here we're in the wildwest and we're on the border with Mexico and that's how it is, you know. But some of us, in our heads, you know, are on both sides.

But in New York it's like every time you go to New York you talk to people that are interested in something. They read or they go to the opera, or they're into art or they're – you know, they're interesting people. They sit down and play the piano or they start singing – it's just a totally different feeling from what you get over here. Over here it's hard to find somebody like that. Over here they're into light beer and partying, that's it – [laughter] – they don't even eat good food, you know, so forget it.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm really curious about that time in New York, that you sort of finished up at Columbia and you were living there as an artist. I guess you were living in Brooklyn then and maybe having your first solo exhibition, also at that time?

MR. BRISEÑO: At Cayman Gallery, which later on turned into MOCHA, Museum of Contemporary [Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Arts, New York] – with Nilda Peraza. [director of the museum]

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, what was that like, preparing for that?

MR. BRISEÑO: It was great. I mean, after I finished graduate school, I would get up in the morning and run to my studio – it was right downstairs – and work all day, you know. I was just so anxious of my career. And I worked my butt off and met these contacts and I was trying to get shows and stuff and it was great. I had my tables, I had my people around the tables and some were just – they're all cut out because I wanted to get to the point, so I wanted to cut out the background to de-contextualize them.

MS. CORDOVA: And where did you get that idea?

MR. BRISEÑO: I don't know, I think just like I said, wanting to stick to the subject matter. I didn't know what to do with the background or – I mean, some have backgrounds or I incorporated them with nature, but basically I think I just wanted to – you know, make the table iconic. Table and people, ritual, you know, like no background. I think it came from that. Trying to really emphasize the point.

MS. CORDOVA: Were all the people actual people that you knew or –

MR. BRISEÑO: No, no, none were.

MS. CORDOVA: None were?

MR. BRISEÑO: No. I don't do portraits. No, I had the boxers always fighting – fighting at the table.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, what about those boxers? Are they specific people at all?

MR. BRISEÑO: No, I think I like watching the two men fight, you know, with just the boxing shorts on, I think that was part of it, and also just a metaphor for relationships. I just thought it was that this sport is so direct, again – I'm very direct in the way I speak and this sport is competitive, just hitting each other. And it's been around forever, you know, more aggressive, I guess than wrestling. I just found it as a convenient metaphor to put the boxers around my tables. My parents did do quite a

bit of arguing when I was growing up. But at the table there'd be lively discussions and so I think that's why I kind of have that fighting at the table thing.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you a boxing fan?

MR. BRISEÑO: Just when I was older. When I was doing those paintings, it was like research and I had to watch them. I would go over to – every Saturday I'd go to visit Papo Colo, the artist in New York and we'd watch boxing together Saturday afternoon. He lived out there on Canal. I think it was just a metaphor for - but just for the strife of life. You know, so many difficulties we have to go through and all the obstacles, so I think it was just a metaphor for that.

MS. CORDOVA: Were they all African-American?

MR. BRISEÑO: No.

MS. CORDOVA: I haven't seen that much of your work and I know also some –

MR. BRISEÑO: Some were.

MS. CORDOVA: – of that work got destroyed, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, yeah, at the fire in '85. That's when I had a – it was a nice – I had a whole floor on East 6th Street in Manhattan and it was a squatters' building actually and they needed somebody with a little bit of money to fix the roof, you know, so they let me up there. And it was almost going to go through. They had a lawyer and it was going to be just a question of time before it really would become legal. I would have it made. You know, I'd have a whole floor in Manhattan. So I fixed it up, totally remodeled and I had hot water – nobody else had hot water.

And actually the fire started because I was in the process of giving hot water from my heater to my neighbor below me, this guy from Sardinia. And he hired this plumber – this crazy, stoned plumber and he used to wear like chartreuse, knitted pants, like tights but they were knitted, and real crazy. You know, it's the East Village. He was the plumber and he was totally stoned, right. So he lights the torch to start – you know, you have to solder the pipes. But that guy was into theater, the Italian, and the whole thing was covered with different colors of like photographic backdrop paper, those big sheets, and it was all covered with that. And it caught fire and it just took off. It took off. But they were like real quiet, then the water was off so they were going to the apartment next door with cups to throw on the fire.

Then I saw it. I smelled something. You know, I was there on the phone and all of a sudden I saw smoke coming through. I couldn't find smoke from the stove, nothing, then I saw it coming through the floor. I went downstairs and I saw this wall on fire, and they were there with the cups. I started like, "Get out of here." Like get – [laughs.] I mean there was a big, big blanket on the couch. It was a real heavy thing. That could have put it out if they would have thought of that in the beginning, you know. But they were so slow that all of a sudden – I mean, I remember like that it spread to the whole ceiling, which was my floor, and there was no – it was just a floor and there was insulation. But there was no, like, ceiling – you know, like sheet rock ceiling. So I said, "Oh my God."

And a friend of mine who was taking a shower, this other woman who lived there – I let them take showers because I had hot water. I was like hollering fire! Fire! You know, she runs out naked, man, and her dog – just grabbed her dog and her things and everybody just ran out of the building. And the firemen were there before because they said, you know, "You're all squatters." They hated us because there were mostly African Americans in the building. You know, we all – "If there's ever a

fire here we're going to wait 20 minutes before we come," and that's exactly what they did. They waited 20 minutes and the whole building burned down. Yep, all those people lost their houses. It was horrible. And I lost all my paintings. It was about 50 paintings and I'd just remodeled the whole place. [laughs]

MS. CORDOVA: It must have broken your heart?

MR. BRISEÑO: It was pretty devastating, yeah. I don't think I've ever been so depressed, and it was so shocking, you know. I ran out with my *chanclas* – lost one on the stair. I had one *chancla*, you know. My friend passed by actually and he gave me shoes and there I was. I went to Pedro's house. Pedro Lujan – I mean, they're in SoHo. I called them and they all came over and we took a taxi back and, oh my God. That was the beginning of it. I used to stay at different people's apartments, like John Santos, some people would go to Europe or whatever and I'd housesit. It was very depressing. I was very depressed.

And then my dealer from Rome, John Wessel, said, "Come to Rome because Rome had a fire and had to be rebuilt, too." I said, "You're right. I'm going to Rome." So I flew back here and saw my parents real fast and I just – my sister was living in Germany. I went over there for – I spent Christmas with her and then – the fire was at Thanksgiving, the day before Thanksgiving. Then New Year's I was in Rome. And I was going to stay three months and then I ended up staying a whole year, so it was – I had a great time.

But I collected – I had insurance because my work was traveling all over the country at the time and since it was cutouts it would get damaged sometimes, so I bought insurance, so I got the total value of that. I got an NEA grant and I sold Ralph Mendes from here, who was the owner of a contemporary gallery in San Antonio, and he bought three paintings. He bought three paintings. So all of a sudden I had like \$68,000. Oh, great. [Laughs.]

So I didn't have to work. I lived a very good life in Europe. You know, staying in Italy for a year and then three months in Madrid afterwards. Then I finally came back. Actually I came back to San Antonio and moved to a house in King William, which is now a bed and breakfast. A beautiful house on Sheridan and South Alamo and lived upstairs and I had my studio downstairs. That was cool. And I thought I would live here. But I couldn't take it again, I couldn't take it. It just hasn't – you know what, San Antonio wasn't not quite ready for me. It's too – it was too, you know, provincial. I was appreciated though, I was offered a job teaching at the San Antonio Art Institute which I turned down.

MS. CORDOVA: So that would have been around 1980 –

MR. BRISEÑO: '87.

MS. CORDOVA: – '87 when you came back to San Antonio?

MR. BRISEÑO: Six months I spent here and I said, you know what, I'm going back to New York. [Laughs.] So I went back.

MS. CORDOVA: But you were only – well, you stayed in New York then for another – until 1994, right? Is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Something like that. I get mixed up. Yeah, '94 or '95. Was it '94? Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: So about like seven years and –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I was there '70 and '71 and then '77 through '85 and then – because I went to Europe, then here, so then I was back in '87. I don't know exactly what time of the year it was. Yeah. That's when I moved back to Brooklyn.

MS. CORDOVA: What was that – I mean, I guess that time in Rome must have been very formative for you and also a time to sort of grapple with all the work that you'd just lost and –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, it was a chance to start over, you know. The first painting I did was – “After the Fire” – that was like a self-portrait of me in red, you know, like with a black background and it was all like dismembered. And I didn't realize until afterwards a little bit that it really was – it was me.

Yeah, and I just painted. I did that painting there, that one that's in the Hispanic book. I did those there. And I worked a lot. I just painted. I was lucky enough that – I had enough money also to ship everything back and all of that. I had good friends. I was lucky I had the gallery there at the time. It was an American gallery, Wessel-O'Connor, they lived there. It was beautiful.

You know, and I was just very interested in Italian culture. I'd been living with Marina already before that for seven years, so I learned a lot. Her aunt – she had an aunt who lived in Venice and we'd go there and I was learning Italian already. So I really got to learn Italian there really well. And, you know, ate fabulous food – [laughs] – and saw the art. Italian food is good, very simple and very good.

MS. CORDOVA: Very good Italian food, yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: Italy is like Mexico, it's hard to find a bad place to eat because the people are into food. You know, like in France people spend half their income on food, you know. They eat very good food, but everything is very high quality. There's no cheap food around. There's no horrible food like here. Here there are so many choices and everybody wants everything so cheap and most of the stuff is horrible. You know, it's like you have to buy imported stuff because the American stuff is horrendous. Everything's the lowest common denominator. You know, American candy bars: I don't like them. American cookies: I don't like them. It's just – I mean, a few, but not too many.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you ever eat fast food?

MR. BRISEÑO: No. I haven't been to one of those in a long time. Sometimes – I'm always in a rush and always in a hurry – you know, but I must admit – it's embarrassing but I do go to some buffets here because I'm – that's where it's fast. You know, you walk in and you eat right away. I'm always in a – I'm very, very busy. But, no, if you go to those fast food restaurants it makes you feel sick afterwards.

I mean, I must admit I have a weak spot for the McDonalds french fries but I haven't had them in ages, and I read they fry in beef tallow and spray them with the smell of french fries. So disgusting, right? But you eat a hamburger, you feel sick. I think it's that bread. I don't know what it is. You know, and sometimes in New York, once in a blue moon, like in this terrible hurry and you're starving to death and you don't have time to go to a restaurant, or at that time I didn't have any money, when you're a student or whatever, so sometimes I would go to a fast food place. And then you feel kind of weird afterwards. Then I realized when you eat good food, you feel good afterwards. You're happy. You're laughing and smiling. And you eat – go to McDonalds or something like ugh! – [laughs] – so, no.

I would say that's America's – that's the United States' culinary contribution to the world is fast food, kind of an indication of where they're at. You know, culture. That's why I feel at liberty to call

Americans hicks. They are hicks, look what they eat. [Laughs.] I was quoted in the paper calling my family hicks at one time. They were real pissed off. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: How did your family respond to that?

MR. BRISEÑO: They got really angry. My parents were already dead. They are hicks, though. They went to A&M, you know. It's like – my oldest brother, the one that's a multi-millionaire says, "Well, your brother's not a hick, he's a doctor." I'm like, oh yeah, okay. Like, doctors can't be hicks, you know? Unfortunately American education is very narrow. It's just like you study that one thing and nothing else.

You know, they don't read, they haven't traveled. It's like, oh my God. It's like they're hicks. That's why they don't like art, they don't buy art. See, the question was in the newspaper interview by Barbara Reneau Gonzalez, "Why doesn't your family buy art?," because they all have money, right? And my answer was, "Because they're hicks." So they printed it – [laughs] – that's when they outed me, too, "Rolando Briseño is homosexual." I don't know if there was any doubt.

MS. CORDOVA: And when was that article?

MR. BRISEÑO: Three years ago. Yeah, I have a big mouth. I take after my mother. Terrible, and I wish I wouldn't say some things but –

MS. CORDOVA: When did your parents die?

MR. BRISEÑO: They both died within six months and it was in '99. My mother died in July and my father died in January of 2000. My mother was 87 and my father was 91. And my father's side, they live to be 100 a lot of them. So, of course my father drank a lot of beer and smoked cigarettes, kind of like me. I don't drink beer; I drink wine, but still I love to drink. But, yeah, so if I die at 87, that's okay I guess. [Laughter.] We'll see.

MS. CORDOVA: That would be all right.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: So what about the foods that you tend to select most often for your work? I mean things like –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, at first – that chicken that's always there is kind of like a joke. It's kind of like – also it places us in the food chain, that we're animals, too, is my firm belief. I know it. We're just animals. There's nothing special about us. I heard on TV the other day, that by the time humans discovered a tool, like a spear, and then it took 30,000 years to get to the next thing, which was – what was it? The bow-and-arrow? I think that was like 60,000 years later.

It was unbelievable – so slow. You know, but that's the accumulation of our knowledge. It's just an accumulation that's what keeps on making all – getting better and better technology. But it'd take a long time to go from like the, the arrowhead – no, it was an axe first and they'd tie it onto a stick and it had – and then to the spear was 30,000 and then another 30,000 to the bow and arrow. It's like – I said, oh my God, it's unbelievable. You know, but it makes – and it kind of gave me more – you know, it just confirmed my firm belief that we are just very developed animals. You know, there's nothing special about us. Created in God's image, that's a bunch of baloney. That's for us to feel better about ourselves.

MS. CORDOVA: Just about the more common foods that appear.

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, right, so the chicken – it puts us in the food chain, you know, because it's another animal and you can see the form of the animal. The other thing that was a problem is making a plate of food look interesting is very hard. Making a plate of spaghetti look interesting – interesting to look at, or a plate or whatever of food, it's hard to paint – very, very hard. It's impossible almost to make it interesting, you know, because I want everything to be interesting in the forms. I don't want it to be boring. So I think that's also why I did the chickens for a long time.

And then the fruit – you know, because I like fruit and I think it's also very symbolic of procreation and regeneration and all that, those cycles. And I love painting the food and then there's that whole – the Zen thing I was telling you about before when I paint and I get the orangeness of this orange – the oranges and of those things that I try to do and – but also – I think mainly it was also that, like I said before, making a plate of food look interesting is very difficult. Always looks like a big mush, you know, and that's why I did it with the enamel and that was kind of interesting, but you'll see.

I have here – I have a few fruits and I like contrasting – like, doing something real realistic and then having something graphic next to it. Doing that. That came later after the expressive work. But then, so I did work on the table, first with the table as an icon then a few – then like a chicken started appearing; the fruit; and then I started getting into more food, more detail. Then I was really going to Mexico a lot after Europe – I did Europe a lot, and then I was going back to Mexico every year – twice a year, and started reading. I do a lot of reading.

And I started reading the accounts by [Bernadino de] Sahagun for “Moctezuma's Table”. I read these old accounts by people who actually lived in the time of – Tenochtitlán – describing the foods and they were – Bernal Diaz del Castillo wrote – and he was at the banquet of Moctezuma – you know, all the plates coming in and Cortez wrote some stuff, too. Then I read what the Americans were saying about that, that ethnographer [Lewis Henry] Morgan saying that what Bernal Diaz del Castillo said and what Cortez said were just exaggerations to aggrandize their conquest. What they really saw – see, Morgan had studied the Iroquois. They make one big pot of food and they distribute it to everybody in bowls. Everybody gets a bowl and he said that's what the Spanish saw. It wasn't all these different dishes.

I said that's baloney. How could they have described these dishes at that time – and plus I recognized the same dishes like *Pipian*. There's a lot of pre-Colombian dishes that we still eat today that are described there. This is – the thing is that, see, Anglos don't have the background of food. How are they going to know? Their background is English, you know, or German so it's very limited cuisine-wise. So then – and then, of course, they have that cultural racism – scientific racism that the West had for so long, right? So they were a product of that. It's just a way to prove the inferiority of the Mexicans, that's what it was. And you still see it today.

A lot of people think that Mexican food is not a cuisine, it's just a – oh, it's just food, it's not a cuisine. But all they're seeing are what is here in Texas, for example. You know, all they eat is tacos and enchiladas, that's it. But then it keeps on expanding somehow and then there's *gorditas* and there's *fajitas* and now there's *chipotle*. It keeps on growing and it will never stop because the variety of dishes and the ingredients that Mexico gave the world is very long: chocolate, vanilla, chilies, the corn, tortillas. I mean it goes on and on and on – mixiotes – for ever.

So that's why I decided when I read what Morgan said, it pissed me off, and I said now I understand what that attitude – that attitude that people have toward Mexican food. Like this one guy who was Texan in New York and he was a chef and he goes, “Well, what do you think about this? You

know, people always say that Mexican food is not a cuisine” – so, you know, I’m realizing that – again, how the Anglos’ attitude is. So this was the first time, and I couldn’t help it, to be didactic. I said, “I’m going to be doing a whole series of *La Mesa de Moctezuma*: the history of Mexican food, so I did it for more than five years: reading books, going to Mexico to research, eating all this great food, you know. So –

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah. [Laughs.] And that’s when the interest really took off and I just – I was older already, the ‘90s, and it was great. Did all that research, all the painting. Then I got kind of bored with it so I just stopped. I wanted to make 100 pieces but I just made 50. It’s hard to do art about food. Really it is, you know. So that’s how I ended up with those *Tortillas Towers*. There’s a building in Dallas, and that’s the UT Austin Tower. That’s chile there – if I was to show that piece, I’d put oil on it. [“El Gran Chile”]

MS. CORDOVA: And, yeah, I mean since you – I was going to ask you about those pieces. How did you make the *Tortilla Towers*, those buildings?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, actually I hired architecture students because I can’t – I’m a very good director, I’m a very good manager and I have great ideas. I love thinking of it, but I’m not going to sit there frying, you know, hundreds of tortillas because it’s just horrible. So I hired architecture students, Mexican-Americans that got into it, you know. But still, it cost me a lot of money, but they made them. I would just tell them, I want this. I want it to be to scale, you know, and this, that and the other, tell them exactly what to do and –

MS. CORDOVA: And corn.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes, corn tortillas. And that one there is not doing so well. But that one is – that’s the oldest one. It’s doing very well. I sold one – [laughter]. They don’t sell, you know, because they get insects. You’ve got to put them in the freezer occasionally. Or I spray it with insecticide occasionally. Even though it’s mixed with a medium, you know, I put a patina with ground *chile* – that’s real chili mixed with a medium to cover the whole thing.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you get that idea? I know you’ve been using chili in your paints?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, that’s just part of – I mean, in my training of the – what the form should be and the subject matter should be – the content, you know. And, again, trying to find new ways of saying something Mexican American. You know, like I just did my last show just now where I made that *Masa Alamo*.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: So I made that Alamo out of *masa* and I think that’s a very good statement about the Alamo, you know. I shouldn’t say much about it because it’s self evident. But it’s *mas Alamo* when it’s made of *masa*, *Masalamo*, that’s the title. So in that one, you know what the metaphor for the *chile* is, right? The dick, right? Penis! So that’s a gran chile. That’s all chile in there in a stocking, you know. But then I put oil on top and it gets all shiny and – but you know I have a show in Montreal now, all the leftovers of – I had made 50 pieces and I sold about 30 and the 20 are on show in Montreal.

Yeah, I got the invitations all in French. I’m happy with that. I didn’t go because they didn’t want to pay for me to go and I wasn’t going to spend my own money and freeze my butt off. They said it

was 35 below. I said forget it. It's too cold. Plus the show was at the Mexican Consulate so you're not going to get buyers. Forget it. I already know that. They didn't want to pay for me. The ambassador from Mexico to Canada went, the governor of Colima went, but they didn't pay for me so I said I'm not going.

MS. CORDOVA: I know that, you know, one of the bigger shows that you were included in was *Hispanic Art of the United States* [*Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Abbeville Press, Inc., 1987], and I know that you've been sort of taken or not taken as a Latino artist. I'm curious, have you also been claimed as a gay artist? Is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah. I think I was in one gay show. They don't have too many gay shows here in San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: That's for clear reasons, I guess, but –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, well, it's changing now. It's changing because Angel and I are starting to dance together like when we go to the Esperanza it's okay. We kind of make a point. Like, even some clubs in New York – like the Puerto Rican clubs in New York are pretty straight, too, very conservative, too. But we dance together – of course, protected by friends around us. And trying to make statements, it's hard to do that, you know, having the courage. It takes a lot of courage. And the times have changed too. So, you know, especially in the artistic world.

You know, here in San Antonio it's so conservative that – like when David Casas came out at first, you know, he was very flamboyant, wore lipstick and dresses and all kinds of weird things. But some of the older Chicano artists would not shake his hand. They did not want to acknowledge him. It took years for – and he did it, and I think I've contributed towards that now – for them to like, “Come on, let's get with it” – you know, you want everybody to accept Chicanos, you have to accept gay stuff, too, and women's stuff, you know. And it was very hard for them to change, but now they have. But at first it was – they wouldn't because it was so conservative. And a lot of them are not that worldly and educated and all that sort of stuff. But it's been – it's been a struggle. I have a few pieces that are kind of gay.

MS. CORDOVA: Like, what would you consider kind of gay?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I have one like a table with like four men around it – or two guys and then two TVs, you know, so it's four people but two are on TV, but they're all male. Because usually with my work I try to make it kind of more universal because that's where my thoughts are more, like in nature and all that. And you know, some say that gayness is unnatural, but it's not true because it exists, but I kind of thought of the whole cycles and recycling. You know, I mean, of reproduction and you have to – obviously you have to have women, right? So that's the whole basis of nature. You know, that's why sex is the single strongest urge in life because of that reproduction thing, otherwise it's like it might – you know, there'll be no more people.

MS. CORDOVA: Except maybe for eating.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, that's when you're young and reproducing because if you're old, you're too tired to take care of those brats. I don't like children anymore; they get on my nerves. People start talking about their grandchildren, I leave because it's too boring, but when I was younger I always had this universalist idea and I think that's why I was kind of not making Chicano art for a long time. I was in New York and the whole world was there and so it was more universal. But now coming back to San

Antonio my work – that was – it really changed, you know, and I – that’s when I really tried to incorporate that more. I hadn’t in the past but when I was in Con Safo and when I was – in the early ‘70s here I did a “Chicano on the Moon” series and all that. Now I try to do it in a different way and sort of that’s where the *Tortilla Towers* come in and different things like that.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. I think with that, you know, we’ll come back to San Antonio and how your work changed.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: So that will be our second session and I’ll stop the tape here.

MR. BRISEÑO: Sounds good.

MS. CORDOVA: Thank you.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right. We are recording. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Rolando Briseño on March 26th, 2004, at the artist’s home in San Antonio, Texas. This is session number two and disc one.

And, Rolando, we sort of left off last time by saying we would come back to your reasons for coming back to San Antonio.

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, from New York?

MS. CORDOVA: From New York. So maybe we could start there?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I think I basically copied my friend Roland Mazuca because he transferred back and then he told me, “Oh, I decided to go back to San Antonio.” And then I said, hmm. I think that New York City was very shocking to us coming from a Catholic military high school and then going to Cooper Union, you know, in 1970. I think I mentioned the porno in the cafeteria and the Buddhism instead of the English literature and all that stuff, so it was kind of – it was pretty wild days in New York in the 1970s. And I think we were kind of, you know, apprehensive about living there. We saw so many things we never had seen before.

But after a year and a half after I made the decision to come back, to transfer to UT Austin, then all of a sudden I really fell in love with New York. I knew I was going to go back. But I decided to switch, that’s when I switched to anthropology actually – major – because I was very interested in anthropology. I just thought it was so important to know all that. And you get to know yourself, you know, you have to know the physical study of man and – but that only lasted like two or three weeks, actually, and then I switched back to art history.

So I got my first degree, a BFA, in art history at UT Austin, and kept on taking classes in the summer just because there were so many interesting classes. I’d look through the catalog of available studies, you know, classes and I’d take everything. You know, except for the science and math, but all the history and anything that had to do with culture, cultural history – you know, anthropology or art history, and I was always taking studio classes, too.

So then I proceeded to get another degree and I got a BA in painting from UT Austin and that's when I went to – La Catolica Lima was part of that. I got – it was an exchange program from UT Austin and so I did that and then what did I do? Keep on studying. I kind of – I can't remember. I was like – I think I moved back here for a while. I think I moved to one of my parents apartments actually for a little while.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, one of the questions I had that we didn't address in the last session was at some point you said you got involved with Con Safo [Los Pintores de la Nueva Raza reorganized as Con Safo, 1972-1975]?

MR. BRISEÑO: Uh-huh. At that – during that time – in the mid-'70s.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. So maybe tell me –

MR. BRISEÑO: I was in Con Safo when I moved back here between degrees at U T. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Tell me about that a little bit.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, when I was – that's when I was doing the paintings and I bought this wax in Spain and I really liked them and I was doing all these drawings of like *Chicanos on the Moon*. That was my – I called it the "Chicano on the Moon" period. And I had *Chicano in the Barrio* and they're very politically charged small pieces; very brightly colored, a lot of layering and scratching of underneath to reveal colors underneath. That's when I was in Con Safo.

I remember we had a show at the Institute of Texan Cultures and it was called "La Movida [1975]" and Mel Casas was the president. I think him, then Rudy Rodriguez. Who else? Roberto Gonzalez was in there at that time. Let's see if I remember. I think Carolina Flores. Who else? Hard to remember it was so long ago, but that was my political active days, you know. And when I was young – in my early 20s, I was – also another choice – the other thing I was thinking of being, I seriously considered like being a revolutionary, you know, because to me it was so important. I mean, there was so many injustices in the world and I just really wanted to, you know, set things straight, you know, and really try hard and that didn't last too long either – a little bit longer than anthropology, but – and I used to protest. I protested against the Shah and the war in Vietnam and I just thought it was my duty and I've always felt a really strong sense of political involvement from – that came from my father.

I told you those other stories about my grandfather speaking in favor of women's suffrage and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, you did.

MR. BRISEÑO: My father told me those stories. My father was in LULAC [League of United Latin American Citizens] and how my father and his friends in the – I guess it was in the '30s and there was a sign in New Braunfels that said "Mexican, don't let the sun set on you in this town." And a whole bunch of young Mexican men went over there and stayed there till the sun set to make sure that they – you know, I don't think it went to court, but it was obvious that it was illegal to do that and they had to take that sign down.

So my father told me these stories when I was a kid and it meant something to me. And then my mother was also very – made me very conscious of how the Mexicans were treated here because I think if you're just a regular Tejano who doesn't have a connection to, you know, like educated people in Mexico, you tend to, I think, be totally whitewashed and you start believing the line that

you're inferior, you know, and you have a complex.

And my mother would tell us – I think I mentioned before about the Alamo, she would say that's not true. It really had to do with slavery and a land-grab and, you know, it really made me think and also made me more proud and that's why I think history was so important too. From – just to substantiate my being here and feeling good about it, you know, instead of feeling like I didn't belong here.

Mexican-Americans are not taught where they come from, so you don't know and so you feel kind of in limbo. I have made a movie titled "The Alamo Hatches brown Babies; Destroying the Alamo Myth". It's four minutes long.

MS. CORDOVA: I understand that Con Safo sort of went through various stages. How would you describe it when you were a participant of it?

MR. BRISEÑO: I was in the later – the latter part. It was already – because like Roberto Gonzalez did abstract paintings and so that was already admissible. Then at that point you only had to be Mexican-American. You didn't have to paint paintings like Rudy Rodriguez who would paint lettuce fields. That was the time when Cesar Chavez was very active in the farm-workers movement and Rudy concentrated a lot on that. The Raza Unida party was going on and a lot of guys painted about that.

MS. CORDOVA: Was the group influencing your painting?

MR. BRISEÑO: I was very political myself already and that's when I was doing the Chicano series. Well, I would get all gung-ho and excited about Chicanismo. But it was not so radical. The point that sticks out in my mind is Rudy Treviño.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, Treviño. Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: But he had – he was the president and he had the meeting at his house and he served Gallo wine and I was like, wait a minute. This is really weird. [Laughter.] I thought this is – I thought – that's when everything started falling apart.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Yeah, you would get suspicious of Gallo wine.

MR. BRISEÑO: That was the time when I didn't eat grapes for like 12 years – [inaudible].

MS. CORDOVA: That's right. Of course. Gallo was the worst of them, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: And grapes were also – were boycotted.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, so of course. Yeah, that's –

MR. BRISEÑO: For a long time. I had them at a party one time with some friends from Austin: Libby Perez. Not Libby, her sister Cynthia came and got all the grapes. You know how poor artists are. It was like a centerpiece for the party. Threw them all in the garbage. That's – after that's when I didn't eat grapes for 12 years.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ask Rudy about having Gallo wine?

MR. BRISEÑO: No, because I was like one of the youngest members and didn't talk too much and they were like all older and kind of – one actually, Dr. Quirarte was involved. We had meetings at his

house sometimes.

MS. CORDOVA: And you didn't stay in San Antonio very long that time, right? I mean, that was –

MR. BRISEÑO: Just a few years. I don't remember.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. BRISEÑO: Seems kind of vague. I mean, I would go to Mexico a lot and to Peru, but I went back to New York in '77.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. BRISEÑO: That I remember because I graduated from Columbia in '79.

MS. CORDOVA: And you stayed in New York for how long? For quite a while then.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I was there '70 – '71 and then I went back in '77 through – till I moved to Italy in '85.

MS. CORDOVA: That's right.

MR. BRISEÑO: I spent all of '86 in Italy. Then I came back here to San Antonio for six months. I went back to New York until '95.

MS. CORDOVA: When you came back in '86, did you get involved with Blue Star then? Is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: No, I was in – that was when I moved back permanently.

MS. CORDOVA: Permanently, okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: So maybe that's about '95.

MS. CORDOVA: And so when you moved back permanently, why – why did you do that? What –

MR. BRISEÑO: Many reasons. One I could barely afford the rent in New York. That was one – a good one. I think also I started real – when I was in New York, my work became I would call it more universal and the Chicano stuff was really more subdued and I was not as political in New York. And when I came back and I really got political again, I mean, and active, I became a community activist when I came back here.

MS. CORDOVA: When you came back to San Antonio?

MR. BRISEÑO: When I came back to San Antonio because I just saw all the – you can see more clearly when you leave for a long time and then you really see what's going on. A bunch of the people living here, they were not – nobody complained or nobody said anything about like Blue Star never having a Latino one person exhibit ever – you know, in 12 years. And so I got on the board and I started talking about it and that's when I made people cry; like Georgia Erck. They own Finesilver gallery [San Antonio] now. I told you that, right? That I was saying – I was talking and because – oh, I brought up the issue that how come they had never shown – there never had been a one-person show of a Latino ever. And I went to – I researched everything because I had all the information.

MS. CORDOVA: At Blue Star?

MR. BRISEÑO: At Blue Star.

MS. CORDOVA: And Blue Star by then had been open for what, five –

MR. BRISEÑO: No, it was 11 years.

MS. CORDOVA: Eleven years. It opened in '79 then, is that right? Or when did it?

MR. BRISEÑO: I'm not sure. I wasn't here. It was Jeffrey Moore and a bunch of artists.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: It was a protest against the museum because they –

MS. CORDOVA: That's right.

MR. BRISEÑO: – were not including local artists in some show they were doing. I think Jim Edwards was the curator, but – and so they got together and that space was probably abandoned I'm sure, you know. They fixed it up and Bernard Lifshutz let them be there rent-free. They still don't pay rent.

MS. CORDOVA: And so you reviewed all the exhibitions for –

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: No, I just looked at all the information and looking for Latino names and I counted all of them in the group shows too and it was 26 percent of the artists in group shows were Latinos, and that includes everybody, you know: Cubans, Puerto Ricans, people from Mexico, everybody. And so I brought that up and the people who took the most offence were the Erck's because he went – oh, what's his name? Chris? Chris Erck went and researched also all the Blue Star records and he said that of the slides – all the slides – slide files that 26 percent were Latino and I said that's exactly the number that have shown.

Twenty-six percent of the artists in the group shows are Latino, you know, so I thought that was – you know, he thought that Blue Star was doing a very good job because the artists shown reflected the slide file proportionately and I said, well, I think it really begs the issue. It's – it shows that it's just not enough when the city is 60% Mexican American. I mean it's an outrage – why is it that – and so then they started saying that we choose by quality and that it was in the mission statement. And I said, well, if you say that you choose by quality – that's when Georgia Erck started to cry – I said then you're saying that women and Chicanos, blacks, are not – don't do quality work, you know. Is that what's going on?

And I just happened to say *you* instead of *yall* because I'd just come back from New York and I guess I must have looked at her and she started to cry and said she would never buy any of my work. They're very wealthy, you know. Never buy any of my work and never step into a gallery that represented me – ever. So my dealer at the time then was also on the board. It's like, you know, a small town. Everybody's on the board.

Karen Rymer made me, or asked me – and I was going to do it anyway – write a letter to her, so actually we crossed letters and she wrote a real long letter. At the board meeting Georgia asked,

“Why can’t you be more like Alex de Leon,” who is, you know, Mexican-American but he never says anything about it – doesn’t bring up that issue, so in other words why can’t you be a good Mexican and not say anything is what she wanted to say.

(Post script) It’s funny that that same analogy came up again several years later when I was talking to Peter Glassford who runs a non-profit gallery here in San Antonio with his Mexican wife Luz Maria. He angrily told me that the reason Mexican Americans are in such dire straights is because they don’t get off there fat asses and get to work; like those people that come from Mexico and make millions! Later when I confronted him about it he said that because I was a respected leader in the community I shouldn’t be talking about these things; why couldn’t I be more like the new Mexican American professor from UTSA. I told him I knew he was talking about Richard Martinez and that the Latino community already knew that he was the Hispanic prof at UTSA and that Ricky Almandariz was the Chicano professor.

And then she listed all of the Latinos that they had bought and, you know, trying to prove to me that they weren’t racist, you know, but I wasn’t even talking about them. I was talking in general. The mission statement says we choose quality work. Well, then you’re saying Mexican Americans don’t do quality work. Anyway, as a result after like I guess about a year of fighting and enduring insults from Lewis Tarver. He called what I was saying the most stupid and idiotic thing he’s ever heard – twice. I couldn’t believe it, you know.

So there were very few other Mexican-Americans on the board and, you know, privately we would talk and they would all agree with me. Anita Valencia and Jessie Amado. Who else was on the board? Chuck Ramirez was in and out. Who were the other ones? That’s about it. Oh, Roland Mazuca was on it. But they would never say anything, so I would bring up things and I wouldn’t get any backup. You know, and then I – one time I kicked Jessie Amado underneath the table, you know, so he – because here they’re always agreeing with you, but then when it’s nitty gritty, you know, they leave you by yourself. So I started kicking people under the table to make them speak up. Tell me – speak up and say what they had said before the meeting. It was real hard.

MS. CORDOVA: Did that work?

MR. BRISEÑO: They would say some very vague things. Nobody wanted to commit or say anything because they – everybody’s scared of being called racist, you know. It could be like that term reverse-racism, which it doesn’t really exist, you know, because the racism has to – it goes from the one with the power to the one without power. It can’t be flowing from no power back up to power; it just doesn’t work that way. That’s what people invent to make people shut up so you don’t say anything. Don’t rock the boat, you know. Keep the status quo.

Anyway, the result was that they changed the mission statement. They took out the word quality and put in the word diversified. And then they started showing more Latinos. We got a hole – and then Jeffrey left and for a short time Roland Mazuca was in charge of the exhibition committee – like for about a year – and that’s when we got – we had the first one-person show of a Mexican-American. It was an artist from New York, Pedro Lujan, and he had a one-person show out there.

MS. CORDOVA: And he was a good friend of yours, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: And I went – I was actually his assistant when I was at Columbia. I became his assistant in New York. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And what led you to even become involved with Blue Star?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I would go to their shows – you know, the scene that was happening and then I have a big mouth, so I was – it was Joe Diaz – because I've always had a big mouth. I have a very blunt way of telling the truth and I'll tell it to anybody. I'm not intimidated by rich white people at all, you know. I'm just not, because I went to Columbia and I hung around with a lot of very – everybody at Columbia – my class half the kids were on what do you call those things, you know. Endowments – trust funds, you know. Their dads were rich – all these kids, you know, so I wasn't intimidated by very rich people or very educated people or very bourgeois people or whatever. You know, I guess because of my experience in Mexico City too. Not in San Antonio – so I'd just speak up and I would say things like that. I'd say how could they have a group show – like they would do these group shows in San Antonio – a group show. There'd be like one of – out of 15 there'd be like one or two Mexicans. I was this is not – this is ridiculous. Half the population is Mexican-American. What's going on here?

So I asked the question also to the board – is Blue Star only for the people in 09, which is the zip code of Alamo Heights, they call it Alamo Whites, where the rich people live. And for – you know, King William, or is it for everybody in the city? I don't know. I think we get city funding, so you know, what's going on here?

If you just put it in your statement, this is only for, you know, certain people, then – or for upper middle class people – whatever you want to do, you know, that's fine with me. I'll shut up, but we need to clarify the statement. I was very emphatic. I learned from the Jews and the African-Americans in New York. You don't – you just don't let people get away with anything. You just say what's going on. In New York, you know, people are very direct, so I learned that and I'm like that too, so really I came back and really let everybody have it. So I made a lot of enemies, you know, and a lot of friends and we changed Blue Star.

Blue Star has really changed under the stewardship of Bill Fitzgibbons. I have his ear. It took some growing pains with Bill too. Once he called me an ass hole in front of Celia Munoz at a Blue Star opening. But at least he listens and takes action.

MS. CORDOVA: And this was either – my question is either right before you came back or right about the same time. You were also – you had a commission to create the Padre – the table on the little island. Yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I was living in New York then – '91.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: And what's his name? He's an architect. Jary, Mr. Jary asked me to submit a proposal and they selected me. A Catholic mens group. I think they just wanted to get me because my brother's city manager. I don't know how they knew about me or what. Anyway, they just selected me and I did this. It was very little money. It was \$4,500. It was nothing. And that piece is there and so I think it's a successful piece because they – it has a new name – it's called the Marriage Island and everybody in the city calls it that. A lot of people get married there or take their pictures there because it has symbols of the mass and has – it's wrought iron and gold, it has gold like where the host was. Because the symbols for the mass was the host and the chalice and so that's – has gold leaf and the rest is just textured wrought iron. It's like a table and the tabletop is – has Spanish filigree and has spears behind it and 16 legs that kind of spring out from the ground. So the idea is the birth of a city from this event when the Spanish came – with Father Damian Massanett and a captain, Teran de los Rios, and everybody wrote everything down exactly what happened. They were coming from Saltillo – decided this is a good place to found a city – built a makeshift alter out

of like branches and stuff, fired some volleys off and it's written down in both accounts that about 500 Indians showed-up– [audio break, tape change] – June was it 19th? No, 21st no 13th.

MS. CORDOVA: June 13th.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah. And so they named it after – for Saint Anthony because it was his day, you know. So that's written down there on a plaque on the bank. And –

MS. CORDOVA: Though it was protested, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: Huh?

MS. CORDOVA: It was protested initially?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes. Some atheists tried to sue the city because this was public property and it had a cross – it had symbols of the mass. And I was not involved directly, but I just read about it in the paper actually. Mike Greenberg – wrote about it and – I mean, I said that if there were Buddhists that would have founded the city I would have done a Buddhist inspired piece or whoever, you know. I just – but I'm not – you know, I'm culturally catholic, but I don't have any faith. You know, I'm not really a believer. But I just am doing this because that's the history.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. Yes, I know. It's sort of ironic that here you are; someone who has moved away very much from Catholicism and that your work is protested as too religious.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, that's funny.

MS. CORDOVA: But I see that ultimately it was accepted within the community and not a problem.

MR. BRISEÑO: Right. Yeah. It went to court and they decided it was okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. But now had – when did you start working with wrought iron? I mean, when?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, it – you know, I do mostly public art now and that was when the – I had a project then in New York at a train station at North White Plains train station. That was out of the Metro North Arts for Transit and the Percent for Art Program of the City of New York. And so I was doing that at the same time. So that was cast aluminum and then painted with epoxy paint, so whatever the public art – the medium changes. It just has to do with what my idea is – what my vision is. Like they give you a train station or a theme or whatever, and then I just think what would say this – what I want to say as far as that thing goes or what – develop a concept. And so whatever material works the best to portray the concept is what I do.

So that's why it could be wrought iron or – plus it's the budget too, so – and there's a lot of those places that do that here. And – or the cast aluminum I made in Monterey actually. Moved over there for three months and did that. What else?

MS. CORDOVA: So did –

MR. BRISEÑO: I did two cast iron projects - a library in Brooklyn and the train station – now I've done a computer-generated piece in Austin.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: And then I just finished the bronze piece here at Trinity. I just finished last week and

then in a couple of months I'll be starting the – it's a plastic sculpture in Houston for the airport. I'll be doing that.

MS. CORDOVA: And what's that going to be?

MR. BRISEÑO: It's Plexiglas. It's heat formed Plexiglas that will be hanging like – they kind of will have shapes, protostars, that when grouped together look like galaxies – kind of the latest computer interpretation of galaxies and it's information from Hubble. And it'll be things like that and very bright – very bright colors and there's a skylight above it so it's going to put very nice colors on the white terrazzo floor – the platform of the train station.

MS. CORDOVA: You seem to be getting more and more into the issue of galaxies or –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I always have. It's just my fascination with nature, you know, that when I was a kid – I mean, I would lie on the grass and just kind of like move the grass and look in and see insects in the earth and then smaller things and just think about how everything is made – everything is growing, and then go deeper into thinking of everything with the atoms and the protons and everything's in movement and that's the smallest elements of nature and then the – that they reflected that – those movements by galaxies and, you know, other systems. You know, our solar system – it's just so fascinating to me. I just think it's incredible.

You know, so I've always tried to put those things – the natural world and rationalize it with the cultural world – with things that humans invent, you know, to substantiate themselves. You know, like religion, and rituals and things like that. And mythology, you know, and how those things mesh, that really is my central theme. The table's just a symbol for those things. So the table is a ritual itself – a gathering place – a locus of community.

There's so many different kinds of tables, you know, like you say give me a place at the table – it's so loaded, you know, with meaning and then there's, you know, a place to eat at the table or you could be fighting, you could make love on the table. You could do a lot of things on the table. Peace table. Round table. You know, water table. There's just a lot of different tables, so it's just a symbol– so that's why I have those *tablescapes*, which is the word I think I invented. I should try to get a copyright on it. I went to parties – somebody used this word. I said, now where'd you get that word *tablescape* from? They say, oh, I got it from Franco Mondini in New York. I said Franco got it from me. I invented that word. Oh, I didn't know.

MS. CORDOVA: Franco Mondini [Franco Mondini-Ruiz]?

MR. BRISEÑO: Mondini, yeah. And then on the table it's like a – of course there's this tradition of still life, so that's why I say my paintings are still lives, but not so still. Everything's in movement. Everything's in movement. There's a tabletop. So always reflecting the – you know, protons – neutrons, you know everything moving – and then also the solar system and everything's just amazing to me, so that movement on the dinner table.

That's why – can't even tell it's a table anymore, [*Proton Couple*] but just by the fork and knives and then you – that's the reference point – has to be there to reference it, you know. It's a couple as man and woman and the three quarks of the proton and then plates and that's what all those reverberations are; like as if the movement of a proton. Big table and [there's a ?] skull up there.

MS. CORDOVA: The skull?

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes, the skull upside down.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, I do see it. And what does that mean?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, you know, a little obvious, it's death. Life, you know, made a female – female, procreation, reproduction – I could go on – you know, food, table, ritual.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about the – sorry.

MR. BRISEÑO: No, I said, then we die, right? You know?

MS. CORDOVA: Right. [Laughter.] And sometimes you throw in remote controls and television –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, because I think that technology is such a influential part of our daily life now. And that – see, there's a remote control right there, you know. And here we are using more electronic things. So to symbolize that, put that element into the still life, you know. And then television – I have a lot of – pieces with televisions, and that – and to put another person participating at the table through technology, like through the TV.

Like on the news programs you see sometimes they're having a discussion or a couple of people sitting around a table and then there's a big screen, you know, with someone else who is someplace else who is also at the table. You know, so I had that imaging before it actually even happened. I had like a TV and the big scale change too. I really liked that: scale changes in my work. So the person on TV would be like really big and then the real people are like much smaller. I just thought it was real interesting – you know, just visual type – the visual dynamics and whatever that can imply. So you always have electronic stuff thrown in there. It's just part of our lives – cannot escape it. It's along with the food. There's always food at the table, but also electronic equipment – something.

MS. CORDOVA: I wanted to ask you about public art. Is that an area that you want to continue growing in?

MR. BRISEÑO: That's what I primarily spend most of my time doing now.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. And what's drawn you to it?

MR. BRISEÑO: I really enjoy the fact that the – I get an opportunity to make a really large scale piece – you know, like \$100,000 piece or whatever – and put it out there in public where everybody can see it. It's not just in museums and someone's home.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay. Oh, another reason why I came back from New York to San Antonio is the weather was just too cold. You know, slipping and sliding on the ice in the winter is just not for me. I just hated it. You know, I'll get some good work done because I just wouldn't go out – wouldn't go out for three days sometimes in the winter, you know. And then it was so dark and it would get dark at 4:30 in the winter in New York.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. It is cold though.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I mean, it's a lot colder in other places, but you know. And so I found myself coming for Christmas and staying like – first I'm staying one week, then I start staying two weeks, then three weeks, and I'll stay a month. Then all of a sudden I started staying the whole winter. I said, what the hell? I'm painting here and there and I would stay with Roland Mazuca and he had a whole house to himself and I'd rent a room – bedroom and then I'd have a studio, too, and I'd pay. You know, it was real cheap. I could afford to do both. And then finally I just realized once it became

so difficult to pay the rent – well, they threw me out of my space. They sold the building it was like you had to move and I sat there as long as I could, you know, and they paid me to get out. You know those New York stories.

MS. CORDOVA: Which place was that?

MR. BRISEÑO: That was on Carroll Street – Carroll and Third Avenue in Brooklyn.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, so even in Brooklyn it was already there and –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, it was starting (gentrification) in that time. That was the mid-'80s. So I decided to just – yeah, when I lived there and then I went to Europe and then here [San Antonio] but when I moved back it was about – was it '95? I can't remember. I think it was like '95 when I permanently moved back. And that was the same year as my last commission in New York.

MS. CORDOVA: And did you move back alone or did you move back here –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I moved back and I got sick. I was – you know, I've had since the early '80s – first it was diagnosed as ulcerative colitis and then it changed to Crohn's. I had like – when I was living here, remember, living in Roland Mazuca's house. I think that first year I came back – that was another thing – my health. I just had this – I had like a ball like in my butt and nobody knew what it was. And my brother Charles is a doctor, so he was treating me and they didn't know what it was and then the specialist was an art collector. His friend, Dr. Wells – that's how I paid him was we traded with art, but they didn't know what it was for a whole year and I was taking steroids and I had terrible like – I was just sick. And then it ended up that it was – what do you call it? The lining of the colon had eroded, so it was an abscess. I had it in me for a long time.

Finally, you know, when they were – see, that's what happens when you don't have insurance. So the only way they found it was with the CAT scan. I didn't have the – it costs a thousand dollars to take that test, right, so who's going to pay? So I didn't get a CAT scan. That's why that happened and then I was like – went to the doctor one time and I was like – that pain – I would sit on my side and my back was all twisted for a long time. I had no energy. And wasn't drinking or anything. Didn't eat meat – I was just trying all kinds of things. Anyway, that one day I went to the doctor and I remember coming back and my brother Jimmy picking me up and I said I have to go lay down and I just lay down in the back seat and I was like passed out. And they took me to emergency and then they operated on me right away.

I mean, it helped that my brother knows doctors, you know. They called up and they gave me special treatment in a way, you know, but it was an emergency. They wanted me to wait in line. I remember my brother told me. I was like – I was standing up, but I was not aware of anything. I was like in someplace else. I was in shock. And then he went and he – nobody pays attention to you in emergency, you know. They expect you to wait, you know, five hours or – he got a – he saw like a bed and he put me on the bed, took me in, and they said – you know, they just took care of me. It was like – they said I barely made it. So they took out a big chunk of my yeah! I know right? It was like – had a big old chunk out – that was the first operation and I've had two other ones since then.

MS. CORDOVA: Really.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I've had 30 inches of my colon removed. It died. They were doing the tests and they couldn't go through it anymore. It was like – and then the last one – the last one – big operation was just two years ago. And it was – actually, it had nothing to do with my disease; it was

just from the scar of the previous operation; adhesions grew and totally blocked my small intestine, so there was intestinal blockage. You know, like the movie the exorcist and she vomits that green stuff? It's real. I never knew. I thought it was all fake, you know. I did it. [Laughter.]

It was bad and I was like – I barely made it that time too, so yeah, I've had some close calls. And that – the disease has changed my art, too – has changed me because for a long time I lived with a lot of pain. I had to always carry a pillow – like a donut – for a long time. Even sometimes now I have to use it. And I'm doing okay. As you can see, I'm healthy, but –

MS. CORDOVA: You seem to be. [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, I am. I go to the gym and everything. You know, do things I shouldn't do like drink and – but yeah, I think that was another reason I came back: because my brother's a doctor here and I didn't have any money, you know, so I was on public assistance in Brooklyn, but I just got better attention over here, you know, because of my family's reputation and stuff, so –

MS. CORDOVA: Right. And your family is all still here in San Antonio, right?

MR. BRISEÑO: Mm-hmm. Everybody's here.

MS. CORDOVA: So –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yep. My brother Alex just became – I hadn't seen him in a long time – all of a sudden he's on TV, the new interim chair of the Hispanic chamber of commerce – Alex – so I was like okay, good luck.

MS. CORDOVA: And he was the city manager?

MR. BRISEÑO: He was the city manager, yeah. Now he spends his whole time on volunteer things: hospital boards, you know, that takes a lot of time. That's why I got a good treatment the last time at the hospital too, because he was on the hospital board and it just so happened that the guy in charge of the whole Care Link program - I went to high school with, so things like that, you know, always help. I got very good treatment.

Everybody came to visit me. I had a nurse. There were all the doctors. I got the best doctors in the – but I spent 30 days there last time – 30 days. I was going to go to – I had this gig to go to this mountaintop in southern Tamaulipas with the University of Texas, Brownsville with Carlos Gomez. Every year he takes the graduate art students to this mountain retreat: the Rancho del Cielo. Masses of people go there it's a – biosphere up in the mountains. It had been planned for a long time and everything. I had bought all the things I needed to buy and I was totally ready. I had my ticket and I was eating – I went out to eat and all of a sudden I got like a stomach ache and I get stomach aches once in a while but this thing like wouldn't go away and would just – and I was still doing things around like pushing – putting pressure on my stomach because it hurt.

It wouldn't go away. Wouldn't go away the whole night, you know, and then I started puking and then all of a sudden – Angel said you have to. I think I waited about 24 hours and he said, you have to call the doctor. So I did and then went to the emergency and waited seven hours for them to see me. That's when I – that's when I was doing the exorcist thing. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: So you mentioned that it changed your art, but how do you see that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I used to do a lot of paintings that had to do with intestines and people with –

you know, that was in the '80s and I think it changed my art because, I mean, as far as like another reason for me to come back – leaving New York and starting to go ahead and come back home, you know, because of the medical care that I can receive and support system from my family.

Well, you know, your art always changes according to the size of your studio a lot too, and sometimes when you're – when I was – different apartments I had in New York sometimes it was just like a regular room was my studio, so the art would get smaller. When I had a big space, it would get big.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have a preference?

MR. BRISEÑO: I like this big studio. I have some big pieces, but like I said I'm mostly working – now I do really big pieces, you know, like 300 feet and 130 feet like in Houston and other – 5,000 pounds of bronze for Trinity and things like that. I really enjoy the public art. I think it's perfect for me. When I was a kid, I was with the brother city manager and Roland Mazuca – Deetzy – Marcela, the neighborhood kids. Instead of playing little cars like in the backyard – we would do that, but we would build cities. We would do urban planning. We had like a – you know, we were really into architecture too. So we'd build really beautiful houses. That's all we would do is just build these really neat looking models of houses. Just – they were kind of funky and were very imaginative, you know, because – and then my brother Alex would always be in charge of us. You know, he'd be the priest or whatever. He was in charge.

It's funny how these things –

MS. CORDOVA: He still is. [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, not anymore, but he was for a while. But so for me the urban space has always been very important and I love it. I think it also goes back to my trips going to Mexico where life takes place outside and the community is outdoors, you know. They don't need public art programs in Mexico because there's art everywhere, like in Southern Europe. You know, the people – Latinos like decoration. They have a baroque sensibility.

When you go outside and there's avenues with trees to walk under, you know, everywhere in Mexico and southern Europe. There's always a monument or two – fountains. The churches are like museums. You know life takes place in the urban landscape, every day, like in all of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean and Morocco they do it too, and all Latin America – in the evening, everybody goes outside after work. Like about 7:00 everybody does the – paseo – you know, El Paseo. Go outside and walk around and have an ice cream or a glass of wine and meet on the plaza, you know, and people just talk in the street and that's why it's decorated; because they're looking at their city, you know.

In the Anglo way, it's more introverted. Everything takes place indoors– everything's interiorized. All the socializing takes place inside the homes. Like in Italy and places in Latin America, you don't invite your friends over to your house; you meet in the café. That's the most common thing. You meet in the café, you know, and it's public life. Life is more public. People dress up, you know, because they're seeing each other, you know. And the Anglo thing is like to dress down – be comfortable all the time, you know, and be in sneakers and shorts and they don't care so much about how you look. For Latinos, how you're perceived is very important. You know, and I think that Anglos kind of see this as being sort of superfluous and unnecessary and, you know, it's like Protestantism and Catholicism, you know. It's like one's more – baroque – the other's more reductivist.

So I always thought San Antonio could be a city that could teach the United States how to be a beautiful city with decorations, you know, fountains, and flowers, and a public space, and so that really – since a kid I thought of this. And so this public art really fits in perfectly for me, plus I make better money, you know, so –

MS. CORDOVA: But do you ever find yourself struggling to accommodate the desires of the larger public project? Is that –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, but also there are certain restrictions sometimes like, you know, nowadays like no nudity. You know, that's ridiculous. But no, I really enjoy the challenge of seeing how I could, you know, embellish this structure – this hall, whatever they give you, you know. And so I really enjoy that. Thinking about it. Trying to develop a theme, you know, or a concept and that's why the medium changes all the time.

And I also – you know – am a good manager – you know, so I'm very – like the piece I just did at Trinity, I didn't get involved with it physically. I hired people to do it. I didn't give one *martillazo* or nothing. I think I touched the stuff like five times, you know, the whole thing. I mean, I picked the textures for each different element, had them – approved the dyes that they made, but I'm always learning a lot from these projects. I love it because I love learning. So every new process is a whole new thing. I studied – learned to do the computer and now I learned about bronze. I love it. And I'm a good – and I love telling people what to do, too. [Laughter.] So I hired – they hired all these people, so a lot of people who I knew – my friends and different kinds of metalsmiths and blacksmiths and other artists were working on – ended up working on my sculpture. It was great. You know, it was a good experience.

I just crack the whip, you know. Pay the bills and pay them and tell them – but I've learned to write everything down in a contract. Exactly what they're going to do, and for what money, because otherwise I've learned that you know, the nice guy needs to give money out left and right and then you don't owe them any more at the end, they do not finish. So I'm becoming a better businessman, which runs in my family too, so it works out for me.

I do have some plans of a studio project of what I want to do, actually, with – I did one piece with what do they call it? Pigment. And I love pigment and what I did really worked out and it's a – the piece is getting old and it's not damaged at all. It has to be covered with Plexiglas because you can't touch it, but I'm going to do the whole thing on outer space and – well, that piece over there has a shaman in outer space. It's kind of like – it's like this one. There's three shamans superimposed from Mexico, India, and Africa, and so it's kind of like the astrological signs. It shows the stars, it has the drawings of different, you know, elements. You know, Orion or whatever; and different constellations.

So I'm going to do a whole thing like that, but that's only by computer. Instead of – I'm getting tired of the computer. To me it's getting too like – I think you start seeing, oh yeah, he did that. Oh, that's a Photoshop filter. That you know exactly the steps they went through and I don't like that because the art should look like you don't know how it was made. I think art should look like – have a life of its own. If you can tell how it's made, I don't think that's so good, you know, and so once I learn how something is done, it kind of bores me.

So I'm going to do this thing. I have a whole series in my mind and pretty soon I'll have a chance to – maybe before Houston starts – to do that series, you know. Do sketches, you know, it's all done and then I just do it. Of course, with that pigment thing you have to do it all at once because you have to plan – if you can do scratches, what color's going to be underneath and what you going to

put on top. So I have to do all that prep work and the whole drawing has to be in your head because I'm going to scratch into it and then whatever comes out underneath is all planned, you know.

I'm also working on nudes on the table series. With photography.

MS. CORDOVA: What about something like the Austin Convention Center, which was just massively long? Right? I mean that was just a very long –

MR. BRISEÑO: Three hundred and three feet.

MS. CORDOVA: Three hundred three feet. You can sketch that out all in your head?

MR. BRISEÑO: I did.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, no. Well, I had the architectural plans – I like to draw. I blew up those –, and then I developed the theme: macro micro culture. And in this project I really got to say what I think about and that whole interaction between the physical world and the cultural world. You know, the manmade world and the God-made world or whatever. And so I really enjoyed it. So I just drew it in there. It went all the way over here when I was drawing it.

That's just what's left up there– it was just a great time, you know, and then some were redone to the very end, like the music one. It was like hills; kind of has like music notes. I'm going like, oh my God, this is really corny, you know. Cannot have like The Sound of Music – sounds horrible, so I wanted to say culturally a little bit about Austin. It's a music town. So I wanted to portray music, so what I finally came up with was a PET scan of a brain listening to music. So I did my research and pictured the action in your brain when you're listening to music. Everything's totally researched, and I liked doing the research too. I bet from going to college for so long I just really like studying. Go to the library and just read books. I just love it, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: And did they give you the scale of the work? So they said that we would like it to be this long or –

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, no. They gave me the hallway, the north hall, the north pre-function area and said what can you do? But I always think that the art should be integrated into the architecture, you know, so I decided to make it by computer because also, Austin's a computer town. You know, so in two ways I captured the culture of Austin. That's a computer circuit, see, compared to blood veins. That's the idea there.

MS. CORDOVA: What are you finding appealing about working on a computer as opposed to painting?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I've thought it was going to be a lot faster and it wasn't. I spent a long time on that Photoshop thing and like just the cloning – oh, my God, I was like the cloning king. Cleaning up that whole mural, because I did the drawings – small drawings and had them blown up. And so once they're blown up – that's when you got to clean it up, so I was like oh, my God, forever there, cloning. I mean, months. And I didn't like that. I don't like being in a dark room like that just on that machine. Nah. I've done a lot of other computer generated pieces and I'm still doing some, but like I said, I'm going to try to go back to not typical painting. I guess it's kind of like more like drawing and with real rich texture – because I like the way that pigment looks. It seems to last pretty well.

I just put a whole bunch of gel down and then sprinkle the pigment after all the colors are done underneath it and then you sprinkle the colors on top and then before it dries I have to draw to bring the colors out underneath. It was all planned and it's fast. It's like a ritual. It's all planned out. It's like get ready – psyched out, you know. It's kind of like I feel like a shaman, you know. Ready and then you do it.

MS. CORDOVA: How long –

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: – from start to finish.

MS. CORDOVA: How long does –

MR. BRISEÑO: It depends. Some are fast and some take longer, but you don't want the paint to dry, you know. So that's what makes you work fast. So you have to totally be psyched up. I see it and I feel it too, so I know, well – and then at the same time when I'm drawing you have the proportions working and everything and it's that glorious feeling you have when you're creating, you know. It's like, you know, you feel like a little god or something, you know. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: It makes me think of the tradition of fresco.

MR. BRISEÑO: Uh-huh. Kind of, right. Because they have to hurry up and do it before it dried.

MS. CORDOVA: Dried.

MR. BRISEÑO: Mm-hmm. Right. Yeah, well he knew what he was doing, that's for sure – Michelangelo.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] He certainly did. We can give him some credit.

MR. BRISEÑO: [Laughter.] Yeah. And he was gay. And I remember – in high school I remember they were talking about homosexuality, right? And I was like – of course I wasn't gay, you know, but then they were talking about art and all that. Oh, then they started saying that Michelangelo was gay and I got all defensive. So I did all this research to prove that he wasn't gay, you know. So that was in high school. Then later on I realized, you know, he was gay.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: And then I was proud of it, of course, when – you know, after I came out, so –

MS. CORDOVA: You just weren't ready for him to be gay.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, not in high school. Yeah, for one year in high school I stopped taking art classes. I always took art classes since I was a kid. My mother sent me to the museum and then Jackie von Honts on Saturdays because the high school we went to it didn't have art. So one year I stopped because it was, you know, it's so uncool to be a teenager and do art. Nobody else did. It was just me. The same old clique: me and Roland Mazuca.

And then it's funny. We influenced other people like Henry Stein, he's now is an artist. I think he was influenced by us; he went to Central, but when we were in high school he was not involved in art at all. George Cisneros is now a visual – techno artist too. You know, so I kind of feel that we had

encouragement – it was from my uncle – my mother’s brother who lived across the street, and what I would see in Mexico in the churches – was my exposure to art. It was not here in San Antonio, but then later on we, you know, we looked for it.

But that was just one year and then I was, oh, no. It’s too much fun. I have to go back and do it again. And I just continued, you know, and then ended up at Cooper Union and UNAM before that in Mexico City.

MS. CORDOVA: Tell me about your friendship with Roland Mazuca because his name has come up so many times and it just sounds like he’s been such a –

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I grew up with him. We were born one week apart. We both have the same name. We lived exactly across the street from each other. And we were both into art and we’re both gay. It’s so funny. It’s just incredible. So we went to – you know, grew up together completely. I mean, he would go to my house as if it was his and I would go to his house as if it were mine, you know. And I would, you know, snack over there and he would eat at our house or whatever. It was just like – the whole neighborhood. And my cousins lived down the same street at the corner. And that block was ours, you know. We just took over the whole block, you know, and we were totally all into art.

It was so amazing. We always had an art project going and we were all doing this giant – my uncle put a giant chalkboard up facing the dining room – like huge – wall to ceiling and it was up a landing – like three stairs up, so it was really nice, like a stage almost, so we’d do scenes. Okay, now we’re going to do an underwater scene. We’d all do underwater things you know. Or now we’re going to do a desert, or different *scapes*, you know, or different drawings with colored chalk.

And we just always were building something or doing something that was like art or craft related. We just liked it and nobody else in the family did it. It’s so funny. I don’t know why we did it. My father was a good drawer. My father could do a lot of things – I mean, build little things. I guess it came from that, you know, so – and my mother didn’t want me to be an artist. That’s for sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, really?

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, no. She wanted me to be an architect. My mother’s a businesswoman. When she came – all her family were all businesspeople. They’re doctors and lawyers – whatever – architects. And she’s oh, you should be architect, architect, you know, but I don’t like math so I didn’t do it. I love architecture, but you know, I just like looking at it and experiencing it, but the numbers thing, still I just can’t deal with it.

MS. CORDOVA: And tell me about meeting Angel. When did you meet him?

MR. BRISEÑO: I met Angel – I guess it was during that Hispanic show – *Hispanic Art in the United States*. I was in that big show

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: And so that was when I was traveling around and so I had a –

MR. BRISEÑO: And then I came back – I was in that Hispanic show and I was actually after Arnaldo Roche. [Laughter.] I thought he was real cute, but he was real weird, he’s like uptight, so I saw Angel

for the first time and I said, well, this guy is gay so I'm going to ask him if Arnaldo is gay – because they're friends. And that's how I started talking to Angel actually. And then I asked him, well do you want to meet for drinks? I had been with my friends like Luis Stand – was a very good friend of mine.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: He was Colombiano and he kept saying, Rolando, you have to start getting your boyfriends from the art shows because you pick up all this, like, trash, like – or like hairdressers or like this one guy, Tim Dakoty, man, the way he spelled his name, I mean, it's a totally made up name and he was Puerto Rican, Irish, and Italian. He was real Brooklyn and he would drive a wrecker. [Laughter.] It was like – la basura. I dumped him when I saw he had like needle holes in his arms and I said, oh, what's going on here? And then I realized he was shooting up and I said I'm not going to hang around him anymore. Out.

So I was – and then my friends told me you have to start finding somebody – you know, decent people. Go to the art shows where there's all these educated people, you know. You know, they're a little bit more interesting than hairdressers, so I decided, yeah, you're right. So I better start doing that. And so then I saw Angel and I said, well – it was – somebody told me or I read or something that if you really are serious about, you know, finding someone, you never have sex on the first date. You actually shouldn't even have dinner. You can only meet and have drinks and just one or two drinks. That's it. That's it. And then the next time you have drinks and dinner. No sex. Then the third time you can have drinks, dinner, and then maybe sex. So – and that's the way you're going to catch them and that's what I did with Angel. It worked.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: In fact, the first meeting we were going to meet at Gonzalez y Gonzalez. They're on Broadway and Houston. And I was 45 minutes late and he waited.

MS. CORDOVA: Aww.

MR. BRISEÑO: He waited and it was really funny because as it turned out he was working at this place. He would do makeup for Adel Rootstein – it was like this English company that does mannequins – very expensive mannequins. They sell for a lot of money. And the place, though, was one subway stop further than my apartment on the R train. It was the third stop in Brooklyn so it's right by my house, and I had a car at the time and so then at 5:00 I'd go pick him up, right, and bring him back to my place where I had wine – had a three course meal, you know, all the time. You know, soup first, then main course, then everything – dessert. Everything real nice, you know. So I – that's how I won him over. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Good romancer.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, that was it. Then I started with, what do you think about moving to Texas? And he was – the first thing he said was, are you kidding me?

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: And that took years.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm sure.

MR. BRISEÑO: And then he came one time and he met a lot of my friends here and he liked them. I

had a real interesting group. Sandra Cisneros and a bunch of people – you know, crazy people. Franco, you know, before he was an artist. And he liked it here.

And so then he got that NEA to go to study in Mexico for six months. And he really liked Mexico and he – we have a dear friend named Wilfrido Avila – his boyfriend used to be with the Mexican consulate here in San Antonio and he died of a brain tumor. Anyway, we met Wilfrido – was a real nice guy and he loves art and he has this house in Cuernavaca that he kept inviting us to stay. So we went – *Hicimos rancho*, you know, we – I go every year, but I don't hang out in Cuernavaca anymore because it's too polluted now. It's too big. So it's just kind of like just land and say hello a few days and take off. But Angel stayed there for six months.

And so he'd come to San Antonio, you know, San Antonio's midway between New York and Mexico City, you know. So little by little all of a sudden he was here. He became a Texarican. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Yeah. That's a new one. So you sold him on San Antonio.

MR. BRISEÑO: Mm-hmm. He liked it. He said it reminded him of Puerto Rico. There's palm trees. You know, a Latino city. And then he said this – he's the one who really brought it to my attention – to the forefront, what a colonized town this is and the minds of a lot of Mexican-Americans are still colonized. You know, and he's the one who made me realize, - being from here you just can't see it – I mean, there was that whole thing with Blue Star that I would always talk about and nobody else would talk about, but he pointed it out to me. See, that was the other thing that was similar to Puerto Rico was the people's attitudes; like they're like – I mean, they're Latino, but some of them are so like – they have a complex, you know. They're like – they want to be so unLatino, but – *no se les quita. Tienen el nopal pintado en la frente*. Have you heard that expression?

MS. CORDOVA: Uh-uh. [negative]

MR. BRISEÑO: From Mexico – like people who look Indian, right? The nopal, you know, is a symbol of Mexico, right, so they have the nopal on their forehead, you know, so it's like the people look real Indian, but they're wannabes, you know.

My mother would always say it was the – *gordos, chaparros, y prietos –son los que siempre se quieren quitar lo mejicano*. My mother was very fair and she would say it's always the ones that look the most Indian that want to be the most white. I think because they're the ones that suffer the most in this racist society. The complex thing is so horrible. And it's true. That's a sad thing and I address that issue in my art. I try to start bringing it up, me and Kathy Vargas. Have I spoken about that yet?

MS. CORDOVA: No. Let's –

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, that's interesting. That's been going on for years. You know, UT SA – finally they opened up a – you know, a university – a public university in San Antonio after – it's only been 25 years, so it was in 1980 – '76 or something it opened. And I mean, you know, that's why the people talk about the poverty of San Antonio and that it's kind of very backward and poor. It's like – and with this complex I'm talking about because there wasn't any institution of higher learning. It was only private. So – and then after, you know, 200 years of oppression – of no – of lack of access to any opportunity – you know, the high schools that the Mexican Americans attended didn't even offer the classes that were required to go to college, so that was generation after generation after generation of that. Any young person who was slightly interested in advancing was – the counselors would say, no, no, no. You can't be a doctor, you know. You better be a mechanic, you

know. And it went on like that for 100 – you know, as soon as the white people came that's exactly what happened immediately.

The Mexican Americans were treated like African Americans really. The only difference is that some – they would call us white sometimes – officially. That's what messed us up and gave us a complex. Oh, we're white, the people would think. It says so. Or, you know, we're not treated like blacks. But really we were. It was terrible. And you see the consequences of it now. That's why south Texas is the way it is, you know. And all those things I find to be so important and I think that if an artist doesn't address them, I feel he's not being sincere. I mean, I think it's urgent. It's a crisis for the Latinos. You know, the horrible dropout rate and educational rate is just horrendous and the teen pregnancy rate is just a disaster.

You know, and I feel as an artist – as a humanist, we need to address those issues. You cannot ignore this – it's enough - people not saying anything about it. People hate to hear it. Nobody wants to hear it. Everybody's in denial about it, but you need to hear it to get the healing over with, you know. It's still happening.

And little by little we've made advances, you know, but we still have a long way to go. So I just think – you know, Joel Shapiro – I was his assistant in New York and he came – he said something I'll always remember. When he showed in Germany he said that as a Jew he felt he had to respond to that even though his work is formalist, you know. It is abstracted minimalist figures, you know. So in Germany he said he had to respond to that, so I took that as an example of the situation here in San Antonio. I've been on the bandwagon with Kathy Vargas for a long time on trying to improve the situation by trying to change the free institutions, the public educational system – UTSA.

She wrote this letter when Francis Colpitt, who is now the chair – acting chair – she's an art historian and she wanted to do – she was real good friends with Jesse Amado and Chuck Ramirez and all those people. She wanted to do a Chicano show. She was going to define what Chicano art was and she wanted to do it all totally in terms of conceptualism, you know, or formalism. Her thing really is formalism. And Kathy – would say no, you don't have the background to do that. You know her specialty is Spanish colonial – Latin American colonial art and that doesn't give you any – you just don't have the backup. You need to study, you know, the history of Chicano art and then do a Chicano art show.

And even Jacinto Quirarte told her, you know, you cannot call it Chicano. And that was a big deal when she wanted to do that show. And Kathy wrote this big letter complaining about that and the attitude of the art department towards Mexican-Americans and Chicano art and, you know, the whole thing about – and that we have no professors that were Latino and a bunch of artists signed it and we mailed it off to Kirkpatrick [Sam Kirkpatrick, UTSA President]. And he had the courtesy of writing us back actually, and gave that issue to his provost de la Garza, I think, was his name. But they never did anything.

So then here we are, you know, and it was like 10 years later and finally like a position opens up just recently – a few years ago at UTSA – a tenure-track position and so then they hire this Anglo woman from Austin. Big search, you know! And we're like, we've been telling you for a long time that you need to have a Mexican American. The city is – come on, it's 60 percent Mexican American. It's ridiculous. The students – the people need somebody that they can identify with, somebody that can talk about – that knows the culture and there's just tons of – it's not like you can't find one – a qualified, you know, Mexican-American for that position.

Anyway, luckily, the art department is so arrogant they did not follow the protocol of the university,

which is that when you – the finalists, when they come in, they have to ask permission from the president to bring them in. They didn't even do that. They just did it all. They hired this person. So because of that little omission, Ricardo Romo was able to un-hire her.

Then I wrote a letter. I wrote it this time, and said how, you know, since we wrote this letter a long time ago – seven years ago – and nothing's really happened and blah, blah, blah. And just to put pressure on them so that they realize we are watching them and we know what's going on and this is very important to us. Come on. Have at least one. Give us a break, you know. I mean, tokenism at least.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. BRISEÑO: It's just terrible. There's so – I mean, the attitude. You know, I mean in the most art departments across the country and in the industrialized world, you know, the fashion is conceptualism, and that's fine. We want to know about conceptualism too, you know. And in some ways I have done some conceptualist things like my *MasAlamo*, you know. That's conceptual. And I have some conceptual things and – but you know, it's – it doesn't mean that just because you're Mexican American you can't do those things and that's fine, but – all we were asking for is inclusion. That's all we want - inclusion and someone who will respect the native-grown – the homegrown art movement of San Antonio. There's a lot of artists here and the art from here is Chicano, you know. It's not – everything else is imported. And you need somebody to be able to discuss it and not just write it all off as folk art, which they do because it has a narrative and uses the same simbology over and over, you know.

But there's new ways you can do things and I have some pieces by certain artists – Luis Valderas, who abstracts some of the same forms in a new way. There are new ways of saying the same thing, you know. I mean, we're all saying the same story – art is – people invented it because it's about us. It tells us who we are. How can you eliminate the figure, which is what the painting professor, Constance Lowe, said the figure is a cliché, so she would make fun of any Chicano or people who wanted to do representational art. You know, so the figure is out.

She had – and then by law they have to have life drawing classes, you know, it's a requirement. She'd make the models wear clothes, so uptight. It's always been done nude, you know. It's like ridiculous. It's like they're so like – you know, they're right and they know what they're doing, and they're the only ones that are sophisticated and we're all a bunch of hicks, you know, and it's just – but I feel like that sometimes too, San Antonio; a bunch of hicks in Texas, you know, and the United States too, you know, compared to Europe, but –

MS. CORDOVA: Have you ever been invited to teach there or –

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: No, you're kidding me [gasp]. I gave a lecture at the museum (SAMA) last month and it was through UTSA, but I – my connection came from Arizona State University. You know, that's how it has to come around. No, Francis Colpitt, chair of the UTSA art department actually refused to contribute the usual funds for this project because I was involved – because of that letter and other things I heard they blamed me for – the first letter – the one that Kathy wrote that that had my return address, I was – I had a public art commission there. When they moved downtown, even before the buildings were finished – in the planning stages, they had a competition and they put all Mexican-American artists – actually, that was their goal – so they selected four of us and I was one of them, but then because of that letter they just sat on the thing and that commission never came

to fruition. And I have all the documentation and everything on how it just petered out and it was retribution – getting back at me for that letter – for having a big mouth. [Laughter.]

That's true. I lost \$40,000 for that. You know, that's what happens when you speak up.. They pay you back.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. BRISEÑO: It comes back. So I have the luxury to come from a middle class family, so I don't need that. I'm not so desperate for the money, you know, and I'm – feel committed to telling the truth. I just think it's part of art. I think if an artist doesn't tell the truth, it's just forget it. It's commercial art, you know. It's just I think that that's the whole point of it, you know, so I just find that – anyway, so I've paid my dues and – by doing this commission at Trinity was kind of like a vindication because it was a bigger commission. It was – I made more money and I'm – you know, I couldn't get a public art commission from the city because my brother was city manager. So I was ineligible too. I mean, when I moved back in '95, there were very few artists here who even knew what public art was and I had done my projects in New York, but I was not eligible. And then it wasn't until two years after he left – so it wasn't until one year ago that I have been eligible. And I'm a finalist for the airport here, so finally, you know, hopefully it will be a real big project.

MS. CORDOVA: Finally you'll be able to work in your own town.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yeah, and I hope it's a big one. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Right. I see that I'm done to the end of this tape, so let me put in another tape and we'll stop the recording right here.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay. [Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right. We're recording again. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Rolando Briseño on March 26th, 2004. This is our second session and disc two.

And, Rolando, I think that maybe – one question I had just about a certain – a group of work or a series of work that you did with this pottery – this sort of pre-Colombian pottery, but with a touch of difference. Maybe you can elaborate on that a little bit and what inspired it.

MR. BRISEÑO: Yes. I call them *Pre-Colombian Corporate Logos*. But what inspired it was the – all the fast-food restaurants. You know, the quintessential American restaurants and that's what we gave the world is fast food, you know, food-wise and so many of them make tons of money off of Mexican food. They're starting to. You know, like Taco Bell. Even Jack in the Box has tacos, you know, and then they go and change it, too. Like I don't know if you've seen this one; it's like a – it's a *tortilla de harina* with beans and then inside of that is the crispy corn taco shell and then it has like the chicken and has tomato with cheese on top and sour cream. And they invent things, you know. And then they have the *gorditas* and then Jack can't say *chipotle*, you know. And it keeps on growing more and more and more because Mexican food is so extensive. They just keep on discovering more and more things.

Even Tejano culture is constantly being influenced – there's a constant influx of immigrants from Mexico, so the food keeps on changing– you know, in waves – it's really ancient food, you know, but it just hadn't hit over here, you know, And so now the American corporations are taking advantage. I mean, like Fritos. You know Fritos were invented in San Antonio by this old man on the west side – he had a little machine that would get the dough and make a little shape and it would be deep fried,

and Frito-Lay bought that little machine from him and took out a patent on it. And the little old man on the west side – his whole family broke, you know, and Frito-Lay – I mean, look at it.

And now, you know, Frito-Lay bought Sabritas from Mexico, so now you see chips with the *chile y limón* and things that taste better, actually, than barbecue chips. Disgusting, right? But – no, it's just they're – too chemical, but the more natural flavor is from Mexico and it's just a – it's a big influx.

I mean, I remember that Salinas de Gortari said during the NAFTA negotiations when asked, don't you feel that Mexico is going to lose its culture when you enact this trade treaty? And he said, "Well, I know one thing for sure. America's going to be eating more tacos." What stuck in my mind is "That's right!" Because it's good food and American culture – they hate using a fork and knife because they don't know how to, so anything eaten with the hands they love it. Hamburger, pizza, right? Tacos next. So I had to make a comment on this – So, I went to Metepec where they make these pre-Columbian ceramics – and then I painted on them.

MS. CORDOVA: Hang on, because I'm just going to – this tape didn't work.

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh.

MS. CORDOVA: But this is still recording. So we're still good, but I'm going to go ahead and pop in a new tape just to make sure that we got everything together. And we are recording. I'm so sorry, Rolando.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. BRISEÑO: Do we start over or just continue?

MS. CORDOVA: No, I think we can just continue from there.

MR. BRISEÑO: So, my friend Wilfrido [and I] in Mexico, went to this town outside of Toluca that makes Pre-Columbian ceramics and I bought a whole bunch that were not fired. And I brought them back and then painted like Jack and if you look inside the vessel all of a sudden Jack's there. You know, it's like – and then I painted logos – like from Taco Cabana – I say cabana [instead of Cabaña] because there is no "eñe" in English [laughs] – palm trees. And different logos from Jack in the Box and Frito-Lay, Doritos. Just big corporations that make their fortunes from Mexican culture. Pace Picante sauce. Bolner's Fiesta Products. Old El Paso.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you consider that work an act of *Rasquachismo*? I saw somebody drawing something about that word and using that term and I wondered if you –

MR. BRISEÑO: For my piece?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, for the pottery.

MR. BRISEÑO: Ruben Cordova?

MS. CORDOVA: I can't recall what the article was but –

[Cross talk.]

MS. CORDOVA: – sort of fitting into that rasquache.

MR. BRISEÑO: *Rasquachismo* to me is like – yes, it's a testament to the culture of poverty that a lot of Mexican Americans live in, you know, and it's *rasquache* because it's improvisation. Like what African-Americans always have to do. They have words for that, too. Their own word being what? I don't know. And so that's what it comes from and then, you know, they tried to develop architecture with that concept and that's what the main – the original building – at UTSA downtown was. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto gave a lecture and it really influenced Henry Munoz and Humberto Saldana – So, Munoz and Saldana really took under – so that's why the buildings look the way they do. So all those different elements of stone and granite and tile and painted surface and all those materials put together. They're really trying to develop a Mexican-American architecture – those two – Henry's not an architect but he owns an architectural firm that does that style of architecture, you know a vernacular – a Mexican American vernacular.

I see it there – the *rasquachismo* there in those pieces because that would be like – they would put things together and kind of or maybe the *Tortilla Towers* are more *rasquache* because they are falling apart. I don't know if I would call it that.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: What is *rasquachismo*? I don't know – these critics always have ideas. The thing is, like with art critics, is that oftentimes and too often they have their own ideas and their theories and they try to – they fit the artists work – to their idea, instead of looking at the art and writing about what the artist's are doing. The artists are the ones who are out there defining culture, you know. And they're just commenting about it – but they want to be powerful, in the United States the critic is pretty powerful.

Plus, the galleries are pretty dominant. It's the market too, influencing art. Artistic life has been totally taken over by the market. That's the single most influential component.

Anyway, actually the art critic doesn't have that much power because the United States has always been kind of anti-intellectual, I think – but for artists it's important. That was Frances Colpitt's thing too. She had her theory of what Chicano art was and then looked for artists that fit into it. Most of the artists who fit into it were not very Chicano and did not even call themselves Chicano. So that's why she couldn't call the show Chicano. So that was big deal. [inaudible].

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever feel like your work has been terribly misread?

MR. BRISEÑO: No. Not that many people have really written about it. No. I'm just looking around for anything that could be *rasquache*. Maybe those dish towels – those cheap dish towels from Mexico and I have the American imagery superimposed with the germs around it. I don't know. Is that *rasquache*? For me those icons that are from Disney, you know, that become so powerful yet they're totally meaningless, you know. It's like-I mean that's the – one of the manifestations of a cultural symbol for the United States, Mickey Mouse. I mean, come on. How superficial. It's amazing. Instead of pushing something like jazz, you know – they could push jazz. I love jazz. It makes me happy that jazz one of the best contributions of this country – has given to world culture – and very few people appreciate it here. They support more European music like classical music – symphonic music than, you know, American music – jazz.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. Well, that's available in San Antonio here.

MR. BRISEÑO: What?

MS. CORDOVA: Jazz.

MR. BRISEÑO: There's a station that has jazz all day and it's not commercial jazz. It's not mainstream. It's Trinity University – very good – 91.7. It's been a couple of years now. Very good.

MS. CORDOVA: So you're listening to that a lot.

MR. BRISEÑO: All the time. No, no, no. I listen to less and less music. I love music but my mind is just so busy with what I've got to do. So, I don't listen to it as much. But I love jazz. Plus my CDs are jazz.

MS. CORDOVA: So does your work environment have to be quiet?

MR. BRISEÑO: Have to have serenity. That's why sometimes it's hard to work and – [inaudible]. Not being able to really have serenity but just kind of keep your head above water. You know, paying bills and then owning this building and the house my parents left behind. It takes a lot of time.

MS. CORDOVA: And I know this building has been pretty special for you and Angel – so maybe you could talk just a little bit about finding it and what it's meant as a workspace for you.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, we, you know, moved from New York and the prices are so low over here, compared with New York. So Angel sold a painting for \$10,000, you know, and I borrowed \$10,000 from my father and so with that we came up with the down payment for this building, which I thought we couldn't afford it was just too big. But I knew we needed something – you know, you always do what your parents do. My parents lived off rental houses – that's how they sent us to college – so, same thing, you know. Buy a building that you can live in and then you rent out so that it pays for the mortgage – it pays for your loan. Unfortunately, the loan didn't work out, but my brother Jimmy gave us cause the bank wouldn't give us. You know, artists – so he gave us a loan and it wasn't enough money. So the rest was on my credit card. It was horrible. It was almost 10 years to pay it off. It was just \$16,000 but by the time – I mean I could have paid it off on my own, but it's the building's expense – just ruined my credit. I could pay it off, but it's – you know, I always keep zero interest on my cards now. I use it all the time. That's why I have a hundred thousand miles to go to Burma. [Laughs] But that has ruined my credit, I think. I don't pay attention to those things, money things. But I always – I have money now and I – everything I buy, I pay for the whole thing. I put it on the card to get the miles. I put it on the card and then I pay the whole thing off – get it over with. It's almost finished. I feel like paying it off and getting it over with.

But after next year it will be 10 years and – we can actually start making money with this building, which will be nice.

MS. CORDOVA: That'll be exciting.

MR. BRISEÑO: We can paint it, fix it up – we like the architecture. That's what attracted us to it, so Mexican deco, very ornate. Just before the crash [of the stock market, 1929]. The buildings were more decorated, because after the crash the buildings were very – were not very decorated.

MS. CORDOVA: Is this from the 1920s?

MR. BRISEÑO: Twenty-eight. Just before the crash. It's changing and the neighborhood is changing. We fixed up a park across the street. We planted all the trees there – the little ones – well they're 8 years old. Well actually we know how to use the city. If you call every week for a year – they do what you want: "Can you please plant some trees here?" I think we caught them at the right place, right time, and they came and did it. We just had to sign a letter saying we would water it – and we

did. We had them put water in the park – and so we've been responsible for the beginnings of this coming back because all of these buildings were boarded up – and they're all coming back, little by little. Some are still used for storage – but someone's going to move into that one, which will be interesting. They're from the neighborhood and an artist moving in over here.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, more and more artists are coming here.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, Vincent Valdez lives nearby and there's [inaudible] lives three blocks up. Other artists [inaudible] moving in. I'm happy with the building.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I don't want to – we're sort of getting to the end of our session here, but I would really like to ask you about that – the recent controversy over the Alamo statues that were going to go up. I think they were – the series --

[Cross talk.]

MR. BRISEÑO: Oh, I was on the HDRC then. The Historic and Design Review Commission.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, I was in this group that Sandra Cisneros started that was called the *Grupo de Cien* and it was a bunch of artists and intellectuals that would meet – what was it? Once a month? Every Saturday? I don't know – anyway, we would meet and have brunch and talk about things that needed to be changed in San Antonio, like public radio. These entities are operating here as if they were in Minnesota or they could be in, you know, Wisconsin. I mean, totally white, totally ignoring the, you know, over fifty percent of the population is Mex-American – and who knows how many illegal Mexicans too. You know, it's come on.

So it was a huge – come on, Mexico's not only to the south, it's also to the west geographically, you know. We're in the Tejano geographic – cultural zone and San Antonio is the capital – but people refuse to acknowledge it. It's a huge Tejano town. And you mention it and people are like, "I like to be more inclusive than that." It's like, come on, it's not like saying that we're excluding you, but it's like saying that Boston's an Irish town. You know, I mean – and everybody calls it that or it doesn't mean if you're German you feel left out. Take a break, when I go to Boston, I feel Irish too, you know, like – you know, it's – my parents got married on St. Patty's day so we always felt we were Irish, and that's why I moved back too – from New York, just to interject – I call it the "*reconquista*" because of course South Texas – Texas was the land [that] belonged to the Spanish, and the Mexico. And it was always Mexican culture. It never was Spanish culture. Nobody ever ate gazpacho or you know, tortillas Españolas. They ate tortillas de Mexico. The Spanish culture was mestizoized here – so what did they eat? Mexican food. Everybody's totally Mexicanized immediately. I hear in the new Alamo movie they actually have Mexican food – more realistic.

So being on the HDRC, getting back to that. They wanted to put up this monument and I said this is outrageous because of course it had the same old line – Travis making the – damn – line in the sand, which never happened. And those, you know, Bowie and Crockett and Houston. You know – Houston – wasn't even here at the Alamo.

And then the – see, the chair of the HRDC was an historian – a Texas historian – Mr. White who was also on – state historical commission. He suggested they better put in a Mexican American, so they put in Gregorio Cortez – and it was very funny – you could see it in the art. The four white men were interacting and on the side was standing Gregorio Cortez to include the Tejanos. And it was a total after thought, you could tell. And I said, this is like totally off the mark, you know. You need to –

if you do a monument, you need to do something new. Do one to Tejanos. Do one to women. Do one about the Mexicaness of the Alamo. I said, you know that they were eating chiles – [inaudible] – and they're eating tortillas. They were not eating chicken fried steak– that's what they were eating, you know. And anyway, so the *Grupo de Cien* – we organized and – a bunch of people came to speak – and we killed it. We killed it. Which was great.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs].

MR. BRISEÑO: It was ridiculous idea anyway so we just totally sabotaged it. You know, it was – they were just like – they withdrew.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you changed other things with that group, or was that really like the –

MR. BRISEÑO: With HDRC? Well, I was – I mean, I always would defend – Mexican culture when I could and, you know, like all of a sudden they come out with these Italian projects for the river downtown, I mean we didn't have any influence from Italy here. I mean, there's Italians who live here, but in the old days the Italians were very Mexicanized. My uncle – the woman he married was half Italian half Mexican. Italians here don't speak Italian; they speak Spanish. Same thing with the Arabs and the Greeks. The few that are here – they're Mexicanized. Some try not to be too Mexican. Everybody has that complex, you know, so a lot of them try to marry Anglos, but a lot of them are Mexicanized because the culture is more accepting.

But, another story: Eduardo Garcia and I were on the HDRC and we were trying to tell Ted Flato that he needed to respect the original design of Main Plaza, in front of the cathedral, and keep the urban wall around the plaza, at least reference it. I was insisting and Ted Flato grabbed me by my lapels and said 'I can be very nasty'. I responded that I could be too and that I had nothing to lose. Right there, in the plaza in an official committee meeting, in front of the other commissioners. Of course he didn't respect the Spanish design and since then his project has been dubbed 'the stairway to nowhere and now they're re-doing the plaza. There's no visual terminus from the river so no one uses Lake/Flato's project.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I was actually asking you about the *Grupo de Cien*. If you had any further projects.

MR. BRISEÑO: I think that we've succeeded in changing the public radio station. We just wrote letters saying exactly how we felt: "We feel that your programming and you have all these things and a certain kind of music. You never have anything about the local music. It's ridiculous. A whole other music sequence needs to be included – Tejano music needs to be included." And they started doing that.

And the public television – now they have Tejano music every Saturday night and – they try to be more inclusive. Their membership has grown tremendously and they started making more money – you know, and everybody's realizing – the museum realized after – that's another story, the museum – so, I mean, they had that big blockbuster show "The Splendors of Mexico," and they got so many people to go to the museum, that's when all La Raza went. They couldn't believe their attendance. They were making tons of money. It's because they were doing something that interests the people. People also – the tourists who come here, they're not here looking for Italian paintings. They're not looking for – they're here because it's like Mexico – and they can drink the water – you know, so only doing these other things is ridiculous.

I mean, all we want is inclusion. We want to know about all the other stuff too. We like all kinds of

philosophies – but just include us. Don't make the Mexican Americans – seem like we appeared from outer space all of a sudden. We have a history here, you know. The shows I've been involved with lately – have to do with that – the birthday of the Mexican American – the conception of the Mexican American was at the Alamo. I made the Alamo out of *masa*: *Masa Alamo Masalamo* [Inaudible] Its just inclusion that we want. Gabriel Velasquez and Ramon Sanchez y Vasquez have been keeping these shows going.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I feel like I've asked you a lot of questions, Rolando, so I'm ready to sort of retire myself as questioner, but if – is there anything else that you would like to add to the tape or anything that you would want to end on?

MR. BRISEÑO: Well, let's see. I just think – would like to mention that when I was real young – during that time – in undergraduate when I came back and I had to find a job and I ended up moving these heavy pipes around like – this horrendous job – and that I quit that job because of racism. Not against me, but against other people. There was like the Mexicans had been there for several years and they had some Anglos and were just there like – I was just there for the summer, but – [inaudible] – and the Anglos were getting raises and the Mexicans weren't. And I found out just by talking to them that they had been there longer, so I had to attack – so I went and told the manager and I told him the whole story and, you know, took off my hard hat and said I quit, you know. Went to the – what do you call that place where you – the federal place for complaints against racism? There's such a backlog, said – it would take years for it to get to my convictions – file actions and - I'm just fortunate that I didn't have to depend on that job for a living. So I've been fortunate like that and it's just helped me to, you know, being middle class helped me to be more active with my activism because I could afford it. I could lose a \$40,000 commission – [inaudible].

So I've always had a big mouth and then – about everything; about the museum and I told people and the director – I just tell him, "You should hire more Mexican-Americans." I just tell them and they freak out, you know, like at dinner parties or art events. They're not expecting that.

I came back from New York for the "*reconquista*" – that was part of it – all that work – with Kathy Vargas. She stopped doing that now because it's a struggle. A lot of famous – Latinos wouldn't talk about that. Like Cesar Martinez, he won't sign letters of protest.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. BRISEÑO: But I've been very happy for my life – I feel privileged to be an artist, understand other countries and cultures and the luxury of speaking three languages and I've met many different kinds of people in the world. You know, I feel good. I feel good.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. BRISEÑO: It's a good life.

MS. CORDOVA: You can't complain. You've got – you've certainly done a lot and it's very impressive and I'm so glad that we've got it on tape and we'll send this into the archives.

MR. BRISEÑO: Hopefully there'll be another 25, 35 more years.

MS. CORDOVA: That's right.

MR. BRISEÑO: [Inaudible.] That's what I like.

MS. CORDOVA: All right. With that I'll stop the tape. Thank you Rolando.

MR. BRISEÑO: Okay.

[END]

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