



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Celia Alvarez Muñoz,
2004 Feb. 7-28**

This interview is part of the series "Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas," supported by Federal funds for Latino programming, administered by the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives. The digital preservation of this interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Celia Alvarez Muñoz on February 7, 8, and 28, 2004. The interview took place in Arlington, 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.

Celia Alvarez Muñoz 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

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova conducting an oral history interview of Celia Alvarez Muñoz for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session one and disc one and today is February 7, 2004. And with that introduction, we will go directly to our questions. Celia, maybe you could just start by telling me a little bit about your family background, when you were born, where you were born and a little bit about your parents?

CELIA ALVAREZ MUÑOZ: Well, I was born in El Paso in 1937, which places me right in the Depression era. And my parents are Enriqueta Limón Alvarez. My dad, Frank or Francisco Pompa Alvarez. Second generation American born, on my maternal side, third on my dad's maternal side too. My grandparents, on my maternal side, came from the state of Jalisco and my paternal grandfather, from the state of Chihuahua, the city of Chihuahua. My paternal grandmother, Maria Pompa, was born right outside El Paso, in Ysleta, Texas. So you know, that makes me a fraction, a third generation, American born.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I understand that one set of your grandparents, you were very close to or your grandmother, in particular. Which side was that?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was my maternal grandmother.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. The one from Jalisco.

MS. MUÑOZ: The one from Jalisco, yes. I never met my grandfather. He died a couple of years before I was born. So, being the time in history that it was, and the war interrupting, my early years, I was raised by my mother, my aunt Guadalupe Gomez and my grandmother Damiana Esparza Limón.

MS. CORDOVA: Damiana Esparza Limón.

MS. MUÑOZ: Limón.

MS. CORDOVA: That's quite a name. It's beautiful.

CELIA MUÑOZ: Very strong, very strong. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I have the impression that she used to tell you a lot of stories and, in particular, maybe about the Mexican revolution. Was that a significant story for you growing up?

MS. MUÑOZ: [My maternal grandparents migrated to the U.S. just before the turn of the century, 1898-99 during the Porfiriato, when Porfirio Diaz was Mexico's president (1879-1910). That's when the railroad system promised employment across the border and a massive demographic shift of farmers took place, opening great opportunities for the prominent landholders. The revolution played almost in my grandparent's backyard. They bought a home close to the border, within ear's range of gunshots and views of the Revolution could be seen from their roof top. It was said that when the opposition would knock on the doors of the Chinese that helped build the railroad, on the Mexican side, asking "Who are you for, Villa or Madero?" If the response was wrong they would shoot them. But they got smart and would later respond, "Dime tu plimelo." The Chinese accent substitutes the "r" sound with an "l" sound and instead of "primero" it was "plimelo" and that rhymes with Madero. This was one of my grandmother's anecdotes.] She had a gift for articulation. Very sensitive, well read in religion. She read daily, avidly and I being the first granddaughter, I think she had the second chance of raising as all grandmothers do, and with more patience and more lyricism, than with their own children. Having had eight children, and four of them surviving, she must have been very busy during this early time in history. So by the time I came around, grandfather wasn't around and maybe that was like an entrance to a more liberating period, because I hear grandfather was pretty stern.

And she wrote, too. She had a gift for writing some very clever poetry about whatever was happening, whatever surrounded us. And if she wanted to critique situations, then it came out in that form. They were caustic little poems. And I delighted hearing them. She taught by example. There was always a story about how you do things, civility, etiquette, manners, and, of course, religion.

MS. CORDOVA: How often did you go to services? You grew up Catholic. Correct?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. Oh, you know, looking back, it was a structured life for her. She was disciplined. She would get up with the sun and go to bed with the birds. She believed in the laws of nature, as being what humans should follow too. She would get up early in the morning and groom herself. I never saw her not groomed. And then say her prayers and off to mass.

And when I was of age, she would take me. Sometimes, I would go out of curiosity, out of duty and sometimes reluctantly. I would not go every day. She would come back, have her breakfast, then out in the garden because she loved to garden. And so, I developed those rhythms too. Mid-morning, she would come in and have some sort of refreshment or snack or merienda and then prepare for lunch, in the early afternoon, she took – or mid or late morning – she took a nap and that was religiously.

And so, afternoons, she would either do some indoor activity, embroidery or sewing or reading. Sometimes we played games late in the afternoons but I had time to explore, within that structure, lots. And being an only child, I did. But then come evening – early evening, there was the rosary. And it was, a lot of it was in Latin.

It was great because I would hear that other language too. And, of course, English was beginning to be sprinkled here and there, not as structured as once I went to school, but that was the regime. I am told that I never followed bedtime rules very well. I am still a night owl, and it was very hard for me to get to sleep – maybe a really hyperactive kid or, just probably foretelling what was to come next.

MS. CORDOVA: Were your parents as religious as your grandmother?

MS. MUÑOZ: No, no. Mom was a teenager. She was 15 when I was born. My aunt, 7 years older than Mom, was at home and so, mostly my aunt and my grandmother raised me. Mom worked. And then World War II pulled women into the labor force. Mom's rhythms were different from my grandmother's. And Dad, my earliest recollection, of him was going off to war, and then coming back for furloughs before going overseas.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did he go?

MS. MUÑOZ: Two fronts. It was the Bering Strait threat, first, up in Alaska and then Germany, right in the heat of the war. Later on, in my elementary school years, Dad came back, and there was a whole period when Mom and Dad didn't even go to church. But I had had that foundation. And I spent summers at grandmother's house. Even though I didn't always participate, those early rhythms were there already.

And my aunt married and had a great deal to do with influencing me and developing a sense of observation. She was very contemplative. She loved to sing. She was a beautiful lady, had many admirers and was quieter in nature than Mom. Mom was more passionate, more intense. Aunt Lulu was glamorous. She was a great dancer. As a young girl she was a good tennis player, athletic. She had grace and toughness at the same time. Childless, she never had children. So I was like her daughter too. She more or less followed grandmother's weekly rhythm.

But then Uncle Joe who did not go to war also had influence. He loved baseball and polo, so there was exposure to football and baseball games. And there were moves. We moved within the city. I went to six elementary schools. A lot of mobility, which was great, because I was curious by nature. And that gave me great opportunity to explore, to develop a sense of adventure.

But, going back to Lulu and developing a lean towards observation which, I think, was a solid foundation for following my study in the arts. She loved things that were oriental and would make me sit to take note of oriental paintings and would say, "Look at the simplicity of the brush stroke. By the time the artist took the brush and painted, precursor to that was a time of just observing, of looking at what it was that he was going to paint. Hours of just looking at how exactly a leaf or a blossom or a bird was made."

"So, first, you look and look and you study what that thing you are looking at is composed of." I mean, all this dialogue going into a child. "And then, after all that preparation, then there would be hours and days and months of practice until that stroke was perfected." Those were valid lessons for me.

MS. CORDOVA: So your aunt Lulu was your first art teacher?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. And she drew beautifully. I thought she was a magician. She drew with colored pencils and I thought it was some sort of magical thing that happened from that tool and I wanted to emanate that too. So those were early lessons. And I was pretty competitive with my peers too.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you know early on you wanted to be an artist? Was that clear?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, I wanted to explore, especially when we moved from the first neighborhood, which was closest to the border, what is now known as Chihuahuita. Canal Street, close to the canal and the river and the bridge, the El Paso street bridge. When we moved from there to Mom's first apartment in government housing, it was not too far from grandmother's. So I could hop on the bus and visit her. When grandmother moved from there, to what was the edge of El Paso, East El

Paso. That's where the Horse-ie, more country, the beginning of the Lower Valley started.

And at that time, it was a very lush, very interesting neighborhood. Some large properties were broken up into smaller plots and Washington Park, the big city park, was established there. So can you imagine, children having a park as the playground? The zoo was in that park and the rides, the kiddy rides and then the seasonal carnivals, and I was lured. Even from the early neighborhood, I was lured into this carnival existence and the circus, and the freak shows, all of that strangeness too. When the carnivals came into town, usually, gypsies accompanied that crowd. And they situated themselves on El Paso Street, put up their stalls, rented temporarily and they were exotic. And, of course, they were people you were supposed to be very guarded against.

One of my latest stories deals with that element too. But kind of Felliniesque. The early years, I remember, because of that big park, the rental bikes, I mean, there was no curfew. We could get up early as a band of children and explore that zoo, explore the carnival grounds, when they came, go under the tents. You know, just like the early cartoons, the kids – Alfalfa –

MS. CORDOVA: "The Little Rascals."

MS. MUÑOZ: "The Little Rascals," type of existence really. In the adjacent properties to Washington Park were properties that had grand houses, remnants of what it was before. The plots were big enough, where they had bulls, cattle, horses that mixed in, with this other element. It was exciting. It was new. Those were the years of empowerment. That's when I started roller skating and riding the bike and spending hours and hours climbing the trees and developing into a little tomboy.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that all at that first residence, the closest to the border or this was the second?

MS. MUÑOZ: The second. The entrance to the park.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And why did your family move so often?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, the early house that was close to the border was a good rental property for people coming across the border. Grandfather always rented part of the house. It had enough rooms to obtain extra income. After Grandfather died, my aunt and my grandmother wished to move out of that neighborhood.

As a matter of fact, it was overdue. The oldest children, my uncle Severo, who continued the taxi business that my granddaddy started in El Paso, the older sister Inez, who married by the time I was born, always begrudged the fact that they were never moved out of that area. There were long debates with grandfather, because they were of knowing age and there was no reason why he did not move them.

MS. CORDOVA: Why do you think he didn't move them?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, I think because it might have been more lucrative for his business. He ultimately lost the hotel that was situated on El Paso street because the Depression came and he didn't believe in paying his taxes. Later, that house was willed to Mom and Dad and they paid, a good chunk of the taxes due. My uncle Severo paid some too.

But grandfather was of the old school, and I mean, aware of the revolution in Mexico and experiencing the Depression, there was mistrust, with politics and the government and why should they give back what they had so hardily earned. So that was granddad. He was just stubborn. He

was an old macho that probably had a dual life.

You know, one at the hotel. My mother never remembers being there or going there. I think it was only when one big 100-year flood in the 20s and the river overflowed. And they temporarily quartered in the hotel, like a mile from the house. But there were always arguments by the oldest, as to why he never moved them out of there.

So that move was long overdue. And it did happen, to a nicer area – a very decent middle class and, very interestingly, a mixed neighborhood. There were white families. There was, I think, one black family and a sprinkling of Chicanos. And then the war, I think, drew everybody together during that time. So, after Dad came back, we moved back temporarily to government housing until the old house, was vacated because it had been rented. I was very upset that we were moving back there.

MS. CORDOVA: You were upset about moving back to the house? Or –

MS. MUÑOZ: I saw it as a step back.

MS. CORDOVA: At what age?

MS. MUÑOZ: About ten.

MS. CORDOVA: Ten.

MS. MUÑOZ: About ten. My second sister, Norma, was born by then and of course, I mean, you uproot somebody and you have to go to a different school. But I really saw it as an economic step back. But it was a very interesting pre-teen time. I had escapes. Comic books. It was the time of *Life* magazine.

I was an avid reader. There was always a library card. Mother was an avid reader. I remember, her early time with me was reading, and my aunt, both of them, belonged to the book of the month club. And so there was always exposure to the written word, and to the visual, with the magazines, pre-television.

There were many, many kids in that neighborhood too and I found that I fit in but I stood out at the same time because I was coming with that other experience. My accent had changed. I had already picked up the English language fluently and I think I have more of an accent now than I did then. So going back into predominantly, a Chicano neighborhood, I stood out and my sprinkling of English was sometimes ridiculed. They would imitate me. But I was proud of my acquired knowledge and information and I did not shy away from that. No. I've always been pretty confident.

MS. CORDOVA: And you learned English very quickly?

MS. MUÑOZ: Very quickly. Well, of course, it was a mixed neighborhood and Mother was very good about drilling me, in school work. The fact that we were in government housing meant she didn't work during that time. So I re-connected with Mom and it was a good experience, living in government housing because, at that time, a strong community of women developed. Most of the men were at war.

So that camaraderie, that sense of community and strong women ties. And, of course, you absorb all that through osmosis because you're just – you're living it. But now that I look back and think back at the patterns of life, you know, that resulted from the economic and global structure – it's very informative too.

So, we went back to the old neighborhood. The house was upgraded, but Mom always wanted a grocery store. She was entrepreneurial too.

MS. CORDOVA: She wanted to own a grocery store?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. She did – I mean, coming with the business sense from Grandfather and my uncle. But it never happened. Dad had other ideas. So this tension was something that I lived with too. Mom's aspirations and Dad's more complacent ways. He was very close to where his mother lived. She lived in that same neighborhood. So there's this dynamic family and societal ties that bind some people.

MS. CORDOVA: How did they meet?

MS. MUÑOZ: There.

MS. CORDOVA: In El Paso? How did your parents meet?

MS. MUÑOZ: They lived in the same neighborhood.

MS. CORDOVA: And so, when he came back from the war, am I correct in thinking they got a divorce?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: That must have been a shock for you as a child?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes and no, because here was this foreign element that came with a regimented life and wanted to lay the law down. You know, somebody who had been – [laughs] – an only child and he was very tense, and very intense. For many, many years, this tension continued, I think until I got married. It was the locking of horns too. Two similar beings – Dad was strong and, of course, I had inherited some of his side of the family and his family was colorful, very colorful and much more bohemian than my maternal family.

Dad was one of several aventureros [adventurers]. There was one in my mother's but he didn't live that long. Dad's were the real colorful, [boisterous] crude. Dad was the youngest and Mom was the youngest of their families.

MS. CORDOVA: What did they find attractive about each other?

MS. MUÑOZ: Hormones. I mean how do you get past it at that age? [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Because they got married when they were how old?

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, they were kids. I mean, Dad was what? Nineteen, 20 [when I was born], very early. No, they didn't get married right away, it wasn't until the war. Mom didn't want to get married. But Dad saw that it was beneficial income. So he twisted Mom's arm. No, she's very strong-headed too, very strong-willed too.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you born before they were married?

MS. MUÑOZ: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: About how much time?

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, I was about four, uh-huh, because I kind of remember, like in a dream. When he was going to Alaska and he came to bid farewell, yes, uh-huh. Then I remember the gift from Alaska. It was a pair of slippers with beads that came from that foreign land. I was curious about who he was, you know. But, at the same time, I think it was more liberating not to have him there.

But, after the war, when he came back, I remember being very happy. I remember announcing to my first-grade teacher that my dad was coming and she embracing me. Those were joyous times but that was – the celebration of his return was one thing, living with him was another.

So, they divorced and then they re-married again. There must have been a strong bond between them but there was a lot of tension throughout. You know, it was two strong-headed individuals that made a life.

MS. CORDOVA: How did your very religious grandmother respond to the divorce?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, of course, she didn't believe in divorce. But, Mom was young. Divorce was happening already then. But then they re-married, maybe Grandmother's influence had something to do with that – it wasn't because another sibling was coming, no. It was 10 years between my sister and myself and then three more years before the second sister.

MS. CORDOVA: Which sister came first?

MS. MUÑOZ: Norma.

MS. CORDOVA: Norma.

MS. MUÑOZ: And then Veronica.

MS. CORDOVA: Then Veronica.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right. It was very exciting. I had always wanted siblings. You know, an only child I think always wants company and then, at the same time, they're pretty self-centered. Mom was real good. It was not like in the typical Hispanic families, where the oldest has to take care of the youngest, no. I had my childhood. Mom saw to it, being that her life had been so structured and limited.

Granddad was one that you do not go outside and play. You stay in your house. But, of course, Mom, being the youngest was, full of the dickens too – I don't think anybody minded him. He was dogmatic about what he thought a family should be but, I mean, kids have a mind of their own and they make their way.

So going back to my dad's family, they started coming into the picture, even before we went back to that neighborhood. I saw them occasionally and then more frequently when we moved back and came in closer contact with them. And it was fun, too, because I had my first cousins.

That was the age of the Zoot suits and I had a very romantic, gorgeous cousin, that was older. He had green hazel eyes and kind of fair skin and just immaculately dressed with a big hat with a feather, and those gabardine pants. And he played the guitar beautifully and sang.

There were always musicians at grandmother's – paternal grandmother's house. And he had a broadcasting station there [and on El Paso Street], one of his friends was Tin Tan, the Mexican comedian who recorded in the studio.

MS. CORDOVA: What was his name?

MS. MUÑOZ: His name was Rafael. There's a lot of Rafaels. My grandfather, my dad's dad, was Rafael Alvarez. A brother, an older brother was Rafael. There was an aunt too, Rafaela and one of their offspring was Rafael but he was known as Chony. This was the one with the Zoot suit – and a pencil thin moustache.

And his sister, beautiful, just really pretty. Each of Dad's sister's had a pair, a boy and a girl. My first cousins. Amalia, had Chony (Rafael) and Bertha. And my aunt Rafaela had Roma, who is a character. She is still alive and went into acting for a while [She studied under Lee Strasburg]. She's in LA. And then her brother, Angel, who died very young. I think he was not quite 20, in a car accident.

Dad's older brothers migrated to California. Part of the family lived there and they would come visit. My uncle Edi, a gay uncle, lived in California and would also visit. Now that was fun, because he would come with the latest tips and trends in decorating, hairstyles, you know, everything. And so, every Christmas, every visit, there was that to look forward to. And had the pedigree dogs or the exotic pets like a mynah bird or a spider monkey. He added an exotic element to the family.

MS. CORDOVA: Was your family accepting of him being gay?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was never spoken of directly but everybody knew. And that was subject matter for my Capp Street Project. Yes. He was fun and there were parties when he came.

MS. CORDOVA: You traveled to California a couple of times, right? Or, at least once?

MS. MUÑOZ: I was in high school when we went to visit relatives there.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you travel at all while you were young? Was that likely?

MS. MUÑOZ: No. Just within El Paso. Never into Mexico, just Juarez. I just knew about Mexico, from the stories of people that I saw in our albums and those that I was told about. The extended families or the friends. An uncle, Tio Benito was the first one that came [to the U.S.]. He was uncle to my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, the one from Jalisco.

Benito encouraged Grandfather to follow. He ultimately settled outside of El Paso and he had property. He had more land. I remember horses, cattle. So he was the one that encouraged grandfather to travel north.

And while on that same vein, within the maternal side, they didn't anchor in El Paso right away. Granddad was speculative. He wanted to see where certain members of the family went to. And where the migration routes were going. So he went to – certain cousins were up in Morenci. That was mining. All right?

I have a cousin that is a writer, Elena [Díaz Björkquist], who is writing [Elena Díaz Björkquist *Suffer Smoke*. Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 1996], about the mining families and their exposure to sulfur fumes – [audio break, tape change] – the irresponsibility of the government and industry.

So no, he quickly said no to that. He said, "Este trabajo es para burros." That work is for burros. He went to Kansas too to see what the situation was. Part of the family went up to California to work. I think he must have worked the fields too, in Hanford. There were some cousins in Columbus, New Mexico, in Morenci, Arizona, and Kansas.

So those veins, those migration arteries, that picture, that map was figuring, into my life. And they [relatives] came to El Paso to visit us. I knew family from Mexico, from Guadalajara would come to do [jewelry] business here in the United States, and would stay with us. It was “The Pass” and we were right in a location that formed those scars, the railroad [center] was right nearby.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you think growing up in El Paso shaped you as a person?

MS. MUÑOZ: Ah! Well, my gosh, there is the border existence and having lived in several neighborhoods, having moved, I think was a nice broad base within the city. Going to a high school that did not pertain to my district. I was supposed to attend Bowie High School which was on the south side. But I didn't. I chose to go to El Paso High, with the Jewish kids.

MS. CORDOVA: How could you arrange that?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was being in the right place at the right time. When I was in seventh grade, there was a recruiting rep from El Paso High, “How many kids, there's room for 10. How many would like to go to El Paso High?” Right away, I raised my hand. I didn't ask. As a matter of fact, 10 of us raised their hands and out of those 10, I think maybe three graduated from El Paso High and two went on to college, Octavio and myself.

MS. CORDOVA: What was your high school like?

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, typical 50s, you know. I said in one interview and I was a typical bobbysoxer. And then being able to live close to the border, have friends that still had connections in Juarez, I just could move between these two spaces very fluidly, very agilely and it was I think that agility that developed me. And that adaptability and sense of adventure, because I would attend weddings, social club dances in Juarez with friends that had cousins or family in Juarez.

And that was the thing to do then, to go to Juarez. You could drink across the border during high school. Of course, we were also proximate to New Mexico. Within El Paso – going to El Paso High exposed us to the other districts, Austin High School, which was close to the military base Fort Bliss, Government Hill.

The rivalry between the other schools, the other predominantly Hispanic school, Jefferson High School. Burses School became Jefferson High School, and that's where I went when we lived next to the park. So, I mean it was just this fluidity and this sense of liberty being able to move within the city.

Parties, the football games, yes, house parties, field trips. Even though I could not participate in many extracurricular activities because it wasn't close to home, there was that element of time, and there were rules. That strict structure followed. I had to be in bed by 9:00 at night, uh huh.

MS. CORDOVA: This was from your father?

MS. MUÑOZ: This was from my father. This developed a guardedness and street smarts too, because we were close to downtown. It was a pedestrian existence during high school. We walked downtown. We could walk anywhere. We walked across the border. So it was this urban existence too. Typical teens? Yes. It was the '50s, it was a period of denial. McCarthyism evolved during that time, always a voyeur the fact that I had to float between these spaces.

I was a participant, but all the time observing. And the fact that Mom had been an early pregnant teen, of course it wasn't going to happen to me. I had my fun, but with both feet planted on the

ground.

And we would see high school girls, the wealthy, that would all of a sudden disappear from the scene and then come back and probably had an abortion or a baby. I was not to be stuck in any situation like that, not only because it was dictated at home but because I did not want anything to impede my freedom.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you see as your future at that point?

MS. MUÑOZ: I always knew – I mean, I started drawing very early. I read the lives of writers and artists in high school and I knew that an unexamined life was not worth living. [Laughs.] So I had aspirations for what? During high school I didn't follow a college route because part of my life was ridged with being a dutiful daughter also. I would hear from my family and from other families that the children would often work and help. Then sometimes you would finish high school and go into the labor force. And I said, well, probably a secretary. But I was drawing all along. I wanted to be an artist.

I came out with a business lean. But being an observer, again, I would notice that people who worked in an office quickly began to resemble their surroundings and became like part of the furniture. And so I said, no, it's a little limited, you know. So, where to? I mean, what is the world? What is this? It's pretty limiting. And I worked while I was going and before I started college, I worked for the Popular Dry Goods Company, which was the biggest boy meet girl institution, aside from college. They employed a lot of young kids.

It was fun working in the big department stores, they were run by Jewish families. And Jewish families foster education and if anybody had ambition, they would be lenient, as long as we would do our job, and that's what happened.

Backtracking, the religion came in very handy. [Laughs.] There was a very young priest, Father Rahm, that I have often omitted from telling and I don't know why because it's such a big part. Father Rahm came into the neighborhood into the south side of El Paso during the '50s, a young, energetic priest, gorgeous and charismatic.

MS. CORDOVA: Rom? R-o-m?

MS. MUÑOZ: R-A-H-M. There is a street named after him [Father Rahm Avenue]. And he was a mover and shaker, great politician of the people, excellent orator. They called him the Bicycle Padre because he went into the neighborhoods on his bicycle and he said mass anywhere and everywhere: in the backyards, in the allies, in the streets, you know. And he organized –and was able to acquire a large building in south El Paso and turn it into a youth club, which was a magnet at that time.

And the only reason why I went out of my district [in High School] is because during the '50s gangs were rampant in El Paso, especially with the south side kids. And I wanted no part of that. And he helped with that situation. He mentored a generation. Some of us that came in contact with him went on to college, to the university. This is where some writers developed, directly from his influence.

Father Rahm also directed a sodality, a religious youth organization, the Sodality of Mary. And being well groomed in religion, I joined so that I could come closer to the operations of that priest, and volunteered at the youth club.

What I did at the Popular Dry Goods Company, working in conjunction with the credit department, an easy job, was just changing addresses on the first credit cards the nameplates, with the old addressograph machines. They had an addressograph machine in the youth club, so I did office work.

And I was desperately looking for an avenue, who would send me to college? I was looking into the Army, the Navy, I wanted to be an illustrator. And, of course, they were not going to send me to school to be an illustrator, not during that time. So I went to Father Rahm and I told him about my struggles.

And he said, "Do you have work? Bring it to me." I did. Right then and there he wrote me a letter of recommendation and sent me to a foundation, the Peyton Foundation, Peyton Packing Company. And they offered trade scholarships, two year, you know. I was their first four-year college scholarship, and I ultimately paid with work – I mean, it was peanuts then. What was tuition? Fifty bucks a semester, \$50 and one percent was the loan fee. And I established credit with them. So anyway, it was through Father Rahm.

MS. CORDOVA: Through Father Rahm you were able to go to college?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. He opened the door.

MS. CORDOVA: And you knew at that point you wanted to be an illustrator. Had you had an opportunity in high school to learn illustration?

MS. MUÑOZ: No, I just took a couple of drawing classes in high school. That was it.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you have any effective teachers in high school for the arts?

MS. MUÑOZ: No. I just knew that I had a gift for drawing, and I wanted to take band too. I liked music also. I was in the music appreciation club but I never played an instrument. It was an art bent, but high school was not really a studious time. It was a fun time; it was a social time.

And then in those days very rarely did girls, even from the business families, finish college. They got married, and it was mostly the males that would go and become lawyers or whatever and then they would marry their high school sweethearts. But I never wanted that limitation – again, not to marry young. So I started going at night, while working at the Popular, taking commercial art, advertising.

MS. CORDOVA: What was that program like?

MS. MUÑOZ: Wonderful. It was not taught by regular professors, it was art agency directors that taught those classes. So it was very direct teaching, rigorous. What went on in the agency is what we were exposed to, pressure, high pressure, brainstorming and ideation. Okay, you think of a product, develop a logo, trademark, packaging, copy. So I caught on very quickly and then I started getting some little scholarships for doing nice brochures.

One of the professors alerted me of a fashion illustration job at the rival department store, the White House Department Store. The Popular Dry Goods Company was owned by the Schwartz family, the White House by the Millers. And they were very competitive, really, great, big department stores, big for El Paso. [Laughs.] I already had several classes of life drawing under my belt, a little bit of design but a lot of advertising. And so I said, okay, this is my chance. New York, here I come. [Laughs.]

I got the job as a fashion illustrator, quickly made the ad of the week, ads in the trade journals and worked in a very small office situation, staff situation directly with a copywriter, and sometimes I would help out with some of the headlines, and the copy. I worked very close with the engraver because I had to take the drawings to him. But I was the only one who punched a time clock because the others were college graduates, and I had to enter through where the masses entered and I did not like that at all. So after a semester I said, "I'm going back to school to finish. Thank you very much for the experience."

MS. CORDOVA: You had left school to take this job then?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah, I was working full-time.

MS. CORDOVA: What year was this?

MS. MUÑOZ: Kennedy came into office, because we had a big sign that said, "Mr. President, the White House welcomes you." [Laughs.] It was '61? '60? Around there. It was marked by the Kennedy administration.

MS. CORDOVA: So what years were you at – it was Western –

MS. MUÑOZ: Texas Western College [in El Paso, Texas].

MS. CORDOVA: Texas Western College.

MS. MUÑOZ: It took me a long time. It took me about eight years because I played so much. I was going part-time to school and full-time working and then partying. The art crowd, that bohemian life, became part of my life too. Andy was more the conventional, but, again, two existences. I had my art friends that didn't mix with his group, it was two separate worlds.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you meet Andy?

MS. MUÑOZ: At the Popular.

MS. CORDOVA: At the Popular?

MS. MUÑOZ: At the Popular and at – he was going to school then too.

MS. CORDOVA: He was in engineering?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. He started with a music scholarship because he played in the band, but he quickly realized that engineering would be the future for him. And so he went into engineering with a music scholarship. He was smart too. Then the Vietnam War starts and he was partying much too, so he saw that in order to move forward – and his name was coming up. I think he got a clue that his name was coming up so he volunteered and he went to the Corps of Engineers, to engineering school. The option was he would be shipped out to Vietnam, or he would be grounded in El Paso. And that's just what turned out in his life. So he lived off base, went to school and was in the military at the same time.

MS. CORDOVA: Oops. And I think our tape is just –

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Celia Muñoz for the Archives of American Art,

Smithsonian Institution. This is session one and disc two of that session. And we were – Celia you had just mentioned something you were thinking about, so maybe that could be our jumping off point.

MS. MUÑOZ: What was life like there on the border? The times form us. Being aware of the political and economic movements, I often have a question for people or groups or friends just in conversation, in being an observer of your own life if you see yourself as part of the masses, or when you came to realize that you were, or do you ever consider yourself apart from the masses.

That question, begs knowledge of those periods in history and the technological aspects that form certain times and foster certain economic, political and social climates too. I mentioned the word agility and an acuteness too, I think your senses are sharpened. Your intelligence develops, but I think it goes hand in hand with your native intelligence. It's that combination that makes a rich stew. Often these conversations with colleagues, peers, are good substance for why we do what we do and entrances into the work.

So what was it like? I was very much a product of the times. Being that my mother became part of the labor force, being that the war globalized Chicanos, that was the first time that Chicanos were globalized and that was with World War II.

MS. CORDOVA: In listening to you speak, I hear the part where you're sort of reflecting on the past and you're reflecting on your place in the past and how other events have influenced your growth, and sort of that you are an individual but you are also a product of your cultural surroundings. And when did you even come to sort of having that consciousness? Or have you always had that sense that you are a cultural product as much as an individual? Or –

MS. MUÑOZ: You know what –

MS. CORDOVA: – is that something more new for you?

MS. MUÑOZ: No. I've always had – this is very telling, too, I think. I always had a recurring dream like in my teens, and the image is a band playing. A band is playing and marching and moving, but I am on top of the band. I'm marching on top of the band. I mean, it was very strange but very telling at the same time. [Laughs.] With early friends it was early exposure to prejudice, okay?

You know, my grandmother told me early on about how Texas treated Mexicans and she experienced it. I think they were traveling and one of her children wanted to eat. It was lunchtime. And they went into a restaurant and they were told to come in through the back door, all right? I mean, I couldn't fathom that. I just couldn't imagine that.

Then elementary school in a mixed neighborhood, having – being able to operate in both groups. Some of the white kids were allowed to mix, some were not. And I had playmates on both sides of the fence and I would hear words like, "I can't play with" – you know, this other person, "I can't play because she's Mexican." [Laughs.] And I would say to myself, how in the world can she say that? That playmate would turn around and say, "But not you. You are not like that."

Now, what made me different? I don't know. So it was always being a little different and being able to fit in anywhere. That's probably the politician in me. [Laughs.] But, it was like how is it that I'm different? So I always thought of myself as being part of the group, but apart from the group. In reference to your input to – I think – the observation started early, very early. I was always very special, especially to my aunt. I mean, even in my awkward years [to her] I was pretty, you know.

[Laughs.] That's a confidence builder.

A voyeur – a participant and a voyeur at the same time. We had the first television set in the neighborhood, and I can still remember it was a Hoffman Easy Vision television. First in the neighborhood to have a washing machine, an ironing machine. Kids always peeked in the house to see when new furniture was bought.

Yet, when I went to El Paso High, you knew who the privileged were. And yet we were part of that. We were part of it, and yet not. There was the difference, yet we were there sharing the same teachers, sharing the same environment. I knew there was a limitation, I knew there were boundaries, but I – especially during college years I knew that opportunity was there.

How was it I was singled out to go and apply for that advertising job? Coming back from that, one of the professors – one of the agency directors was very upset I had quit to finish school. “This is your opportunity,” because they saw a lot of promise probably. He said something to me, “Okay, you’re coming back to school, but you’re going to be the best one here, okay?” Very early competitions, where my printmaking professor competed with me in the Texas Fine Art juried exhibition. I got the prize and he didn’t, okay?

MS. CORDOVA: Wow.

MS. MUÑOZ: [Laughs.] So the confidence was there and the aspiration was there and the hope was there.

MS. CORDOVA: What was your work like at that time?

MS. MUÑOZ: They were etchings. Okay, what was it like? Again, an observer, I loved Goya. And I loved Rembrandt’s works that dealt with life, of course, coming from that part of the world offered us narrative works, and his depicting of country life, and the bible, interested me too. But the fact that he arrived and then he lost it and his sight too, were great lessons. Goya in being able to observe society with esoteric works and his political works against the war, and the Caprichos, as social commentary, all masterfully composed. Hogarth was important too.

Of course, Michelangelo, having the sense of form and the scale of the works. The grandness and the fact that they were part of architecture. But it was social commentary. So the etchings – I started picking areas of El Paso that I knew would change, those were the early etchings.

MS. CORDOVA: What areas did you select?

MS. MUÑOZ: What I ran across. Even though they weren’t exactly where I lived, what fascinated me was the beehive existence in tenement houses that I would pass, and the fact that people lived in that situation. I mean, that was a drastic existence. Sometimes they didn’t have hot water; they had one sink for the whole complex. And yet life was happening there.

And then I would study the change and the play of light. Probably being lured by photography already, the dark and light and how that shapes, and how to structure, how to compose. But the narrative aspect, the narrative quality of the works is what I think motivated me more, into going narratively, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you predict would change for these areas? How did – what did you see as the future per se of those tenements?

MS. MUÑOZ: I knew they would change. I knew they couldn't continue to exist that way. How could they? You know, how long were people going to put up with living that way? And they have changed. Activism has forced landlords to be more responsible. This is where [Foucault ?] is coming from, too. In finding beauty in these dire straits, you know? Yeah, finding the beauty in what – where you least expect it.

MS. CORDOVA: So what did your professors think of this work?

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, they encouraged it, especially Massey.

MS. CORDOVA: Massey?

MS. MUÑOZ: Dr. Robert Massey was the one that took me under his wing, and he was an etcher too. Dr. Massey also depicted some of these areas and kind of opened my eyes to it. He did some small etchings of the penny catchers, the kids that would stand under the bridge and catch pennies, in constructed paper cones. That's when the bridge was lower. There was a club in Juarez that had an act, a gorilla act, where an individual, was half gorilla and half female. And he documented that.

But what I wanted was the grit mixed with beauty. The life, you know. *El Verdulero*, the vegetable vendor, and *Los Siete Infernos*, the seven infernos, I knew that would be phased out. It was happening. *Ropa Usada*, another etching. A big, warehouse, old building that had turned into a used clothing store, that I knew would later change to something else. But the play of light, always looking at – [Audio break, tape change] – it like a photographer, I think. I would sit down, sketch the idea and then go into the lab and develop it on the plates. Along with knowledge for the technique, I've been more of a value person instead of a colorist. Later technology begins to inform. But, I really wanted to master a sense of composing within the gray scale.

I like that formality, so those compositions were architectural, too. *Sombras*. I got a prize with *Sombras* from the Texas Fine Arts Association. It's a group of buildings at night.

MS. CORDOVA: And so what year did you finish up at Texas Western?

MS. MUÑOZ: '64.

MS. CORDOVA: 1964. And what did you do after that?

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, I came out with such zeal, for passing down information, and very missionary. I wanted to open the minds of young children. And so I went into teaching. I said, how many more children will be given an opportunity. So this is a step into service, social service. Oh, and it was fun.

I would go back to school during the summers until I got my teaching certificate so I could move within – I wanted to teach art but I knew that the palette would be wider and that I would be able to reach more kids if I taught other subjects and connect them to art.

By that time, El Paso had an art curriculum, at the same time they excelled in the country with a social studies curriculum. And I liked the form because it presented a more holistic picture. The connections into research, were wider. And I approached my art classes that way.

We had a curriculum but I used it kind of basically. I went in with what was happening then, and it was the Olympics. Taking the Olympics and applying that to the rest of the classes and to art. So they were aware of what was going on, the newspaper was brought in, what they saw on television,

and it was this broader picture.

My art classes moved from just the art activities into productions, connections to the fundraisers for the schools, like their carnivals. Presented and charged for plays, plays that the kids developed. And they were bilingual so that the parents could understand them. Again, crossing barriers or joining, and contributing to the school, not only the classroom but the school situation.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that sort of also maybe just a sense of being part of the early 1960s at that moment in time?

MS. MUÑOZ: Maybe, yes, the social consciousness that was developing. But it was a very logical way of learning. What made sense to me was not to teach the different subjects disconnectedly. I became aware of some educational programs functioning elsewhere and how periods were tied, how the math period was tied to history, okay, that sense. And how philosophy and geography expanded.

Geology and archaeology came into the picture. If we were studying mountains, then it just wasn't going outside and observing, but it was taking out the geology books to learn how mountains were formed. And printmaking or mask making, viewing films of different cultures that constructed masks for rituals and their social life.

I was given the liberty because the classes generated money. Halloween, mask productions went into the haunted houses that generated money for that or the art fairs, Christmas cards. A kind of art club was formed. So it was of the period, and I married a year after I finished college, but Andy was finishing his masters.

MS. CORDOVA: How long had you two dated before you married?

MS. MUÑOZ: A lot. It was off and on about eight years.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, so it was a lot.

MS. MUÑOZ: About eight years. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: And after all the sort of making yourself wait for what you – what finally made you decide that you wanted to be married?

MS. MUÑOZ: That's a good question. There was a bond – [laughs] – there was a bond.

MS. CORDOVA: I imagine there still is.

MS. MUÑOZ: But it was hard too because there were ties to the art, to the art crowd. I was dating within that area too, so it was a flip of the coin. [Laughs.]

No, I think it was his sense of logic, his temperament. The fact that there was aspiration, and a willingness to move out of El Paso. And so I said, "Okay, let's do it and get out of Dodge" – [laughs] – it was the time to do it, it was the time. There was some sense of independence, too, at the same time. And then later that sense of independence like played a bigger role, during the rise of feminism and during the late '60s, which I really wanted to experience.

It was a time when women were burning their bras, and I had two children and a husband that worked for the bureaucracy. So that was very tense, very tense for me. He worked in D.C. and the

demonstrations were taking place. And I was rooting for the demonstrators, but my husband had to get across the bridge to go work, and it was politics bursting at the seams. It was exciting times, yet I had these two children to raise.

I saw again the competitive spirit; I saw that Andy was growing, and that he had to grow on his own and that I needed to grow on my own. So we separated. I took the children and I wanted to go to graduate school. And I knew I couldn't do it if I stayed with him, and I had my job back in El Paso and I thought there might be an opportunity. But the scholarships were for administrative jobs at that time.

And I said, well, what about art administration – I looked to the University of New Mexico, but at the same time I had to experience the '60s. I had to – [laughs] –

MS. CORDOVA: I know, you had all that partying background.

CELIA MUÑOZ: Right, right. And the '60s in El Paso came to Albuquerque, New Mexico. And many friends were getting their doctorates, and long hair, and the commune living. And so I would teach during the week and then on the weekends I would take my kids and go to New Mexico and become connected to the scene. I have some good friends that were like maybe the first doctoral – the first Chicano to get a doctoral in English. And [Antonio and Teresa] Marquez are still teaching at UNM [University of New Mexico], I believe.

MS. CORDOVA: Who is that, sorry?

MS. MUÑOZ: Antonio and Teresa Marquez. Still teaching there. I think in literature, and library science.

MS. CORDOVA: So what years were these that you were separated?

MS. MUÑOZ: Three years. I mean Woodstock was when I was still on the east coast. '74 we grouped again. So it's three years before that I broke – '71. When my grandmother died, that was the excuse to go back to El Paso. And I had my job already prepared there.

I went back to the classroom but with an eye on trying to apply [to a graduate program] nearby. It was very hard with two children and wanting to experience it, still. I saw it very difficult and kind of limited and very bureaucratic if I had stayed with Andy. So the picture changed. The parity didn't change. With his move to Oregon – see first it was upstate New York, Washington, D.C. Then he went to Vancouver, Washington, I wasn't with him then. I went home to have the second baby.

Then I joined him in DC, and that's when I broke away. And he stayed there for a while and then went to Portland, Oregon. And the whole parity just changed. He became coordinator for the Spanish-speaking program with the government and oversaw cases of discrimination of applicants for government jobs. So he was responsible for opening the door more.

He became involved with a group in Oregon that was getting grants for activism, people that were connected to the Cesar Chavez College movement up in Oregon, and some films were being developed and I became part of that scene. I saw all the raw footage before they were edited. I think three were produced, and then I made a poster for the production.

I did a poster for Irma [Irma Fisher, worked for the Civil Service Commission] and David [David Gonzalez, a film producer]. It was being exposed to the politics at that time. They were championing for the laborers and the migrant workers. The films were on the existence of the Colonias,

something I had not delved into before.

So that was eye opening. My kids were going to the Jewish Community Center preschool, and I volunteered to be an aide, because there was a waiting list. And I wanted them in a very good early school. So I volunteered and helped out with the Spanish lessons. And at the same time part of this other group, with my husband.

So life became more interesting. It became meaningful; it became connected to that.

MS. CORDOVA: And you two reconnected through that?

MS. MUÑOZ: We reconnected through that, yes. The union had another layer, another type of glue. When I traveled from El Paso up to Oregon, I stopped off in New Mexico, I stopped off in LA, I have a cousin that's a very good photographer, Oscar Castillo, that knew Los Four, I didn't even know what Los Four meant. [Laughs.] And I remember going to their house, some sort of party. Then I made a point to stop in San Francisco, at the poster work shop [and I saw murals being painted by the Mujeres Muralistas in the Mission].

MS. CORDOVA: La Raza Gráfica, or Galeria de la Raza?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, La Raza Graphics. It wasn't the Galeria, it was the atelier, or the print shop. And I still have some of those posters. I just walked in and I wanted to see what the process was, and this was before knowing that I would do a silk screen for this other group producing the films.

But the dialogue became much more interesting, much more textured and more meaningful. And the kids loved it, Oregon, it's still in their memory. The lushness of the country, a park at every turn. It's a green state. The minute a bus crossed the state line it was no more cigarettes. So it was very much, within and about the times, and then Texas opened up.

And we said, are we ready to go back to Texas? You know, sometimes blood, convention, or you become aware of how progressive you think you are, but these other pulls – these other societal and biological pulls that form you – I said Texas, Fort Worth? So I called friends who said quickly, "Yes, very good museums, a lot of universities are there the Kimbell [Art Museum], the children's museum of science and history," et cetera, et cetera, proximate to Dallas. And the weather is not as gray and I live for the sun, I'm just a desert rat. The grandparents were here, so we came back. We came back to Texas with a mission to go to school.

MS. CORDOVA: Great. And I know now that you have an event that you need to go to tonight, so I feel like I should probably wrap you up, even though I want to keep talking so much longer. But I feel responsible. [Laughter.]

MS. MUÑOZ: That's great. That's a good stopping point.

MS. CORDOVA: We'll come back to Texas, literally, tomorrow.

MS. MUÑOZ: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] Now I'm going to stop the tape.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Celia Muñoz for the Archives of American Art,

Smithsonian Institution. Today is February 8th, 2004, and this is our second session and disc one. Celia, I think you have something, actually, on your mind that you wanted to start us off with, so please do.

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, I think we concentrated more or less on life. You know, what was happening during the '60s. And how the late '60s – the '60s didn't happen until the late '60s really and into, the '70s. And what it was that I was doing at that time besides raising those two babies that were 18 months apart. You could see the footprints going up on the wall, all the way up to the ceiling – [laughs] – because I was climbing the walls.

But when we left El Paso when Andy took the job with the government, the option was either Louisiana or New York – Albany, New York. And I said, "Well, Albany is closer to New York City so let's go there." And things were beginning to filter down, to the southwest. I mean, I remember going to the only art house in El Paso, to see the Andy Warhol film [*Empire*, 1964], the one – I think it was the Empire State Building where you could just leave the theater, go have your coffee or whatever and then come back and you didn't miss a thing, because it was just the same thing.

So things were beginning to filter down. At the college program, which had been basically classical and not even into AbEx [Abstract Expressionist], okay? But a new movement came in with a new chairman from California. Well, I was on my way out and he came from the field of ceramics and introduced the [Peter] Voukos movement. You know, where clay was deconstructive too. That was exciting because some of us hungered for the new movements. Then it was going up to New York, hitting some galleries. Op art was in full swing, and then all of the '60s posters too, were printed in such profusion in sync with the music world.

We got tickets to return to the city to see *Hair*, the production. We got them in August and came back in December. They were that booked. Of course, the music scene was terrific. And civil rights at the same time.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you go to Woodstock?

MS. MUÑOZ: No. Our kids were too small, it would have been insane. [Laughs.] And there were enough people in the apartment complex where we lived in Alexandria, Virginia, younger kids, not the marrieds who went.

We had as a neighbor a nephew of [J.D.] Salinger, who was writing at the time. And people were doing internships in Bethesda. People from South America, a lot of the New York element filtered down to D.C., and we would discuss what was happening. Of course, there was open communication with my friends attending graduate school in Urbana the Midwest, some of that filtering through too.

But as far as producing art, I was looking. I was in a period of absorption, of alertness and of experiencing.

But it was that stew brewing, bubbling, and then the Vietnam War, which I was against. Andy, before we left El Paso was on call for the Bay of Pigs situation. At the same time a hometown friend and artist did the portrait of Cesar Chavez for *Time* magazine. I saw it when we were in New York. So all this was in flux.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you mean Andy was on call for the Bay of Pigs?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, he was on alert, living off base, going to school, still in the Army when it

happened, when everybody was on alert. His whole company, the whole world, was on alert, very different from Dad's war experience when things were patriotic. I would make my Christmas cards, sketch the kids a lot during that time, because I loved drawing, but not into full production. I couldn't, there was no time. And Andy's job with the government was one week at home, one week away – a whole week. It was difficult.

MS. CORDOVA: How did having children change you? Or change your perspective of the world?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, you have to grow up right away. And, unfortunately, all of that happened when the emphasis was on youth. It was youth leading and that was the first time, you know. I was aware that what happened in the '50s provoked the '60s. And it was a natural flow, I think. It was a natural turnaround, turnover and a very exciting time. Dangerous times are exciting times.

When we returned to Arlington [Texas], there were neighbors who had been at Kent State during the situations there. You know, this strange criminal activity, the serial killings and mass murders which started in the 60's. The guy [Charles Whitman] at the tower, the Texas Tower [August 1, 1966]. All these dynamics in force, so, my antenna was up. You have to grow up with your children and you have to provide a safe situation when it isn't at large, when this strangeness is occurring.

I followed the news avidly. At the same time, trying to develop a ritual for children to follow. That's why we landed here in the 'burbs looking for the best school system. Having been in education and at that time Arlington was prized, for having a good school system.

A lot of people say, well, why did you land in Arlington and why did you stay? [Laughs.] And, why did you come back to Texas? And like I said previously, we wanted the kids to have the proximity to the grandparents. Tradition pulls you, convention pulls you, and at the same time you're trying to experience and live the times.

MS. CORDOVA: And perhaps also a sense of loss had pulled you, right, because you'd also lost your grandmother in '71 and that seemed an important moment for you?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, very much so. It was '71 when I returned to El Paso. I know that what was lost was lost even before we left, because she had difficulty speaking. She had a tremor, Parkinson's disease, which my mom now has. You know, this kind of benign tremor. When I would go visit her, she was like a well that wanted to still share information, okay? And still I am pulling my stories from different times of her life.

And at best, it was sometimes hard to understand her, but I would visit her regularly when I still lived in El Paso. Her difficulty started closing; biology just started closing that chapter in my life. But, yes, it was a loss. So that prompts you to start dealing with your parents and that aspect of mortality, starts appearing and you deal – yours or a parent and what is it that you want to leave?

I started thinking about that in graduate school. Why. Why do you do it? Why? Do you do it because you can, because you need to, because you want to. You discover that that's a mission in life and that is an example you leave your children. You know, it's very much about can-do. Okay, even though the production of work and the difficulty of having to be a mom here in Arlington and then travel one hour each way commute up to Denton.

MS. CORDOVA: To go to graduate school?

MS. MUÑOZ: To go to graduate school. But I was so determined that when I registered, I didn't go before. I did not want anything to disappoint me. I said I'm going to register, make the commitment

and that's what it's going to be. And when I found out that the time allowed was two years to – the limit was five years – I said, okay, let's see how this goes. Let's see how I can manage it and it was the '80s – it was the '80s, okay?

MS. CORDOVA: You started in 1977. Is that correct?

MS. MUÑOZ: Right. Right. But cognizant of the fact that I had to catch up. Lots had happened in the art world that I was very hungry to grasp. I knew that, if I needed to take some prerequisite classes, I would do it and make tracks fast. Luckily, there were visiting artists here, Al Souza, that came from a conceptual approach. So I picked his brain early on and then Ashley Walker, she was there part-time and I never knew why she was not full-time. She was exciting and there were not that many women artists that came from that conceptual vein teaching at NTSU then.

They had the traditional painting professors. But it was when Vernon [Fisher] came onto the scene that things really continued to flow – and it was a very trying time for him because he was right there at the door – you know, at his own door. He was good to talk to and I think he was basically and ultimately the one that understood what I was trying to find and was very encouraging.

Al Hoffman, he later had a gallery in LA but he came as an art historian and brought the American School of Painting into a good dissecting forum. We really have to go into that era of Americana, the signature style. And most everything that I experienced during the 60s was good preparation. Exploring the different religions, going into the spirituality thing, because, I mean, when we were in Oregon, it was visiting the Hare Krishna temples to see what was happening there, being exposed to Joseph Smith, the Mormon, and then the *Bhagavad-Gita*, with the Indian influence. So Aldous Huxley, the readings of Aldous Huxley, that were encouraged by my undergraduate professor and, after experiencing the 60s, then you fully understood because that's what it was about.

MS. CORDOVA: A sort of *Brave New World*.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, Themes and Variations, and The Doors of Perception. So, when the topic of Rothko came to my attention and all of the other AbEx, I went more towards Rothko because he was more mysterious and I think connected more. I saw a vein. And my conclusions were right, on following his painting [I wrote a paper on him that Al Hoffman traded for one of his papers], I think I went back to Rembrandt, and that trapped light that is very evident in his works. And then Turner, who was turning more abstract but still, I think, that paint quality and that spiritual theme with the material. There is material fidelity, aligning of fidelity with material, which I had started exploring in undergraduate through architecture.

And, Frank Lloyd Wright who was using materials and letting materials speak, of course, with – AbEx it was the paint too.

MS. CORDOVA: When would you say you really gathered some consciousness of Abstract Expressionism? When can you see that?

MS. MUÑOZ: Here, in graduate school.

MS. CORDOVA: So really not until attending graduate school?

MS. MUÑOZ: Right. I had seen – yes – no. Undergraduate, undergraduate. But it was still approached more in – Dr. Massey wrote his dissertation on the philosophy of art. And what he did was examine the formal arrangements, of a two-dimensional space and when we looked at the AbEx work, it was still with his philosophy of how to negate illusionism, okay, toy with the flatness of

space too, and with material fidelity. So that started back then, but a closer examination into the spirituality – [Audio break, tape change] – that was discussed during graduate school, not only the formal qualities but the spiritual and the conceptual aspects. When I started looking back at what I had seen before, and then trying to make sense or trying to encapsulate that information and the influences. Of course you had to go into the Beat generation, and the poets of that time. And so I started looking at Burroughs and the Beat poets. And of course, having visited San Francisco after high school, I knew which areas were their gathering places.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did you go?

MS. MUÑOZ: City Lights [bookstore], of course, we had to go up to North Beach, to Vesuveous Bar – [laughs]. And revisited with the different projects, when I returned with more cognizance, and more nostalgia. When we left El Paso and went to New York, the first place I wanted to go to was the Village Vanguard, and it was Mingus we heard. I was already into some jazz. So it's this musical brew that came from the '50s as influence too.

And graduate school again made me observe what was happening socially and politically in the McCarthy era. And then looking back at how we dressed and what television presented, because TV was for the masses, and started replacing the written for so many people. And it was more visual information, but still very Pollyanna, and that denial and then ideal thing.

But when I raised the kids, this fantasy issue started up again on T.V. like the genie in the bottle [*Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*], and then the comic books, the evolvment of that mentality, satirical *Mad* magazine, and Big Daddy Roth. But it wasn't until I got here that I examined that. Yeah, [Bob Crumb's] Fritz the Cat was very popular when I went back to El Paso, and my connection with New Mexico during the early 70's. So that comic book form was still informing and –

MS. CORDOVA: Was pop art allowing you to see the relevance of this literature, the comic books, incorporating into your art or was this –

MS. MUÑOZ: Of course, I mean, Lichtenstein and Warhol that turned it upside down. The one that was a little more difficult to grasp at – when I came back to graduate school, another one that turned things on their heels, was Jasper Johns. But the biggest champ of all was Duchamp. [Laughs.] Yeah, so I went like from Goya and Hogarth, you know, all the political and narrative, into a truly liberating thought, and that was through Duchamp. I thought that was the most brilliant thing, you know, to give birth to permission to just break it.

And then Cage fascinated me, that aspect of the minimal, which was kind of like what Warhol was doing with the films too. My friendship with John Hernandez, who is an avid Warhol disciple, and reads, embraced Warhol. A lot of discussion was prompted about minimal art and serial mass production. But moving into the conceptual realm I really like Robert Irwin, seeing and forgetting. What you see? Yes.

Duane Michaels. Duane Michaels, because he was [serial] photography. And I started in print-making but was quickly – geared during the reviews – my last review, “But have you explored photography?” And I said, “I would love to.” And so that opened another big door, examining what was happening photographically.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you used a camera much before?

MS. MUÑOZ: Snapshots, chronicling the family, staging my sisters. You know, that kind of

manipulative play, but it was just snapshots. My cousin Oscar, son of my first cousin, on the paternal side, who took me to meet Los Four, served in Taiwan and Vietnam, he brought back a camera for me, a Petri camera, which I still have.

Great lens, good landscape camera. So I started fooling with that even before going to graduate school, just taking pictures and seeing how the quality had changed. Dad brought back from World War II a German bellows camera that stopped action.

We took some beautiful photographs with that camera, and I'll never forgive him for ultimately – I think he ultimately sold it, without ever asking me. How dare he. [Laughter.] Film, the progression with film, the quality of film started becoming evident too. But I used the Petri for my first assignments here in North Texas. And then I bought a used camera, from one of the professors that allowed me to exchange lenses. So we began to see things differently [literally] through the lens. A lot of darkroom activity, which was great.

And questioning, really questioning – trying to grasp what could happen technically, but questioning whether you had to go that route, because conceptual art allowed you to go and develop at the Fox Photo, you know, and present that way. I remember when I spoke with Souza and I asked him, “Well, what is it, do you develop? How far do you go into it?” He said, “Nah. I don't care too much about that, it's the end result, the idea, I'm after, I take it to the Fox Photo.”

MS. CORDOVA: So was Souza maybe your first introduction to conceptual art?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. Yes. That's when he was doing boxes, and serial photography. And then there was evidence, very conceptual and very logical too. He wasn't that mysterious because he gave you all the clues, like maybe the pieces that he had shot were inside, the box, see. I like those clean connections, but they take you somewhere else. So there was a lot of construction and deconstruction at the same time, and that fascinated me.

MS. CORDOVA: I have to ask you, you just used the term “deconstruction.” And where were you building that element of your theory from?

MS. MUÑOZ: [Initially from a Jackie Winsor piece that had combustion inside the cube, she showed at NTSU as a visiting artist. I saw it as a construction out of destruction and...] Readings. Readings. Because as I did in undergraduate, spent a lot of time at the library just exploring on my own, all right? Hours and hours at the library just going beyond the class requirement. When it was advertising, I was looking deeply into the international awards, the journals, the collections, to see what was happening outside the area, outside the States. How is Japan doing? And, you know, who's winning the prizes and why.

Yeah, so doing voluntary research, once I discovered that conceptual art was informed, had all these tentacles too, made for a very exciting puzzle. So I wanted to examine, all these pieces. And the fact that it was I think a nice, logical hop from cubism, where you begin to see things from these different facets and examine space in three-dimensional work. I made that connection, when you begin to evolve form or break form. And you do your own arrangement. And then it was happening architecturally too, with even large mass buildings like what was it, Best Buy or some of those big warehousing buildings where part of it was not complete, which I think also was informed through Voulkos Ceramics, which takes you back to Rodin, where it's clay, that you see as the initial material. So it's this thing about materiality and concept.

And the brainstorming sessions from advertising I think were a terrific link too, because it's concept.

You know, it's about thought; it's about thinking. And it's about seducing, very much about seducing. But it also is examining. And in order to sell, you have to think of new avenues, new approaches.

MS. CORDOVA: I have to ask, I just realized that I can see a lot of your work as very seductive, but with advertising it's both seductive and in some ways insidious.

MS. MUÑOZ: It's deceptive. It's very deceptive. And it's wit coming into play. Yeah, figured out that it was deception. The lure was deception, but there had to be a logic to it. Nowadays, you tell it with an in-your-face approach. Sometimes the links don't even have to be there. It's just absurd. And the more absurd – we're still trying to – we haven't evolved our approach, our mentality in advertising. It's still third grade. It's still very sophomoric Dadaesque.

And we're mining that right now and I wonder how sophistication will come back into it or whether sophistication lies in being able to continue to harness, arrest development, you know? We're looking at the situation that we have here in America with obesity, yet our advertising doesn't take us beyond the desire, uncontrolled desire state. So, yes, advertising informed the work. You have to capture.

For me, complexity had to be packaged neatly. I knew that complexity could be built in what was not there, but what you provoked. And narrative work and book work, it's packaging, again. And packaging a synthesis of these ideas, you know? It can be – it can look like it's one idea but I like building the complexity and at the same time destroying myth and destroying your perception.

You try to understand how it is we think; how we perceive, but employing again, deconstruction. You try to break – [laughs] – that down. And then going into more of the theory of the structuralists – and constructivism veins, precursor to deconstruction are logical moves.

At the same time you are finding your voice. And voice, for me, had to come from way inside. But how to present it in a conceptual form was a big lure.

It was a big challenge, too, and then employing advertising which informed conceptual art. The facility to present an image, as in advertising, with text mixed and turning things upside down, because the world is upside down since World War II. Within AbEx there is dialogue of Hiroshima, right? And the fact that the smallest particle, the atom could affect in that grand a scale.

AbEx, I sometimes see it as looking through the magnifying glass and finding the smallest particle and blowing it up. I mean, that's like Lichtenstein giving us the dot pattern. I had to use a magnifying glass because I wanted to see how the comic books were printed when I was a kid. And then when he brought it to surface, I said, wow, it's not negation. It's telling us what it is, how it's made. And Warhol too, I mean, this is what we live with. This is what we're saturated with.

AbEx, were looking at a stroke of paint, and magnifying that stroke of paint. And isolating where it could be pure pigment and make it gestural, it involved the body, the involvement of the body, whole muscles, you know, the scale. It was about motion. Yeah, action, motion, physical and I think that was most exciting for me because I've always been restless and the use of the body has been important in either traversing space, jumping from one end of the city to the other, moving across the border, it's action. And it's acquiring and assessing, everything that comes across you.

So I see that. You have to go back to like, Velazquez too, an early modernist and his application of paint. Once we begin to use materials for what they are and paint for what it is and that negation of

the picture plane, which was really being looked at and pushed aside.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you apply the technique of magnification or the action, the idea of body action to the work that you were doing in graduate school? Were you able to apply it?

MS. MUÑOZ: In the body, I think I went more towards the mind. The body was being used. I was using the body. I had to travel the distances. I had to acquire the materials from here and there. You're here in the Metroplex. You're in a commuter area, all right? In application to the work, I turned to a form that was so anal it was like the opposite. The books, were – well, the form was so pristine, so exact and I'm not a math major [laughs].

When you construct a box, it has to be so perfect that it could – whoosh, when you open it and close it. I think the body came into play by trying to predict what it was that I wanted, the viewer – in trying to guess how the viewer would logically approach a work and confront it and examine it and it was in gearing – in trying to predict and lure their action. How do you want this piece to be approached? What's the first clue, the first step in approaching that piece? How will I construct their steps, all right? And what they are about to experience – is the clue evident from the exterior, some clues?

But again, deconstructing – the myth of what you're looking at –

MS. CORDOVA: There's also like, you're constructing their archeology of knowledge, you're –

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. Very well, very well put. And when people approach the work, I would stand back to see if my prediction was accurate and then learn from that tendency. We read from left to right, you know. There had to be some clues to natural tendencies. But the tales flip that perception, because what they thought they were seeing, you know, is evidently not what they had arrived at nor the concept – how the concept was filled or what the ultimate concept, that fusion of concepts was at the end.

MS. CORDOVA: So you rely on a sort of natural deception of your viewer, that you would start with one idea that is potentially acceptable but then intentionally seek to dismiss that original idea?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah, I read books and sometimes I am, seduced into a work of literature by maybe the opening sentence. It has to grab and I have to be there. Some writers are very good that way.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you consider yourself a writer as much as an artist?

MS. MUÑOZ: It came so naturally. It comes so naturally. I mean I didn't study writing. I read. I had a tendency to write a little rhyme, in high school. I liked poems. I would be good at reciting things that appealed to me and then write about what was happening. I was on the school newspaper staff, and it was writing, too, about our experience as seniors then.

So there were little bits of poems and rhymes, that kind of thread from way back then. But in articulating verbally in conversations, I noticed that there's that irony built in. I would notice by the reaction of whomever you're speaking, talking to. And I said, well, let's just put it into writing. And I remember Ashley Walker said, "Just do it like you're telling me, just like you told me. Just do the work that way, or just say it that way." So it was a natural evolution – combining the words.

MS. CORDOVA: Was Ashley Walker your book making teacher?

MS. MUÑOZ: No.

MS. CORDOVA: No.

MS. MUÑOZ: She taught a drawing class and some art history. I took a drawing class. It was mixed media. Judy Youngblood was the book-making professor, she came to the discipline from [Walter] Hamady, from the Midwest, where book art was big. And she approached it as a structural form. She brought really great examples to class and visiting book artists. At the same time, Vernon was talking about Franklin Furnace Gallery in New York. I was starting to do that before I realized that there was a narrative art branch to the art that was happening at the same time. And then Mail art, real experimental. I'm kind of ritualistic in my life but I always like surprises and the unpredictable.

Yeah, that element has to be ever present. When I'm not in the studio, it will be rearranging my home to where it makes more sense or hasn't been looked at before. So things have to be in flux all the time.

Andy, my husband, says, "But why does everything have to happen at once?" And I say, "Because that's processing. You are always working through, you're finding, you're discovering through the process." He likes predictability. He has to have things ordered a certain way but there's always a better way. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: According to you.

MS. MUÑOZ: Another way of doing it. Right. It's just constantly problem solving. And it's an ingredient that has to happen in my life. Yes, I'll take yoga, I have done since the 70s, but different branches to work the different muscles and combine yoga, resistance, Pilates, calisthenics, power yoga now. So it's this constant mixing. Mixing.

MS. CORDOVA: And with that, maybe you could talk a little bit about "The Enlightenment" series, which began in grad school. Correct?

MS. MUÑOZ: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: How did that emerge first? What was – was number one the first piece?

MS. MUÑOZ: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: So *Chispas Quememe* –

MS. MUÑOZ: *Chispas Quememe*. But before that, I did kind of a flip books, using my niece and nephew as models. Kind of Duane Michael-ish. And examining my life, my ritual, the battle of trying to juggle everything at the same time. That started going into the works too. But "The Enlightenment" series started with number one and that's when I went back to fully embrace and explore the form with the knowledge that I had behind me, I'm an avid believer that nothing is lost whether you do it wrong at one time. Whether you think it's unnecessary knowledge. No. It all went into those works.

And "The Enlightenment" series was about a certain period in one's life. What were popular books written then [Robert Fulghum's bestselling book, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*]? You knew everything by kindergarten. I think those questions early in life can be profound. It's always like a little story about a bigger idea. Since I started using myself in the works it was uncovering and examining my experience and packaging it into a conceptual package.

Bringing with me those early beliefs and all my baggage was an enlightenment, was an enlightening

period for me. That was permission to just be and acknowledge what I had thought but still with questions. So that's why I called it "The Enlightenment" series.

MS. CORDOVA: I guess, one question that occurs to me is that it seems a lot of the trajectory towards that is also about considering other forms of spirituality and the issue of Catholicism in your life and what state was that at for you? Raised as a very strict Catholic, but here you are with a family, in graduate school and having tested a number of different ideas about your faith.

MS. MUÑOZ: I think it's all there in the works. Examining those very notions of poking fun, and connecting it to different beliefs. Ultimately, I think we're all here in this world for similar purposes. I think the issues of civility and mores are similar, even though they appear to be different.

Now, we're examining – whether the West – were the Greeks the basic philosophers, the initial philosophers? The new connections are that there is strong involvement from India as well. That's Eastern thought. So it's this amplitude instead of the issue of control, you know, which every segment of society tries to structure. Well, you can see some differences but there are vast similarities. So again, it's like that Jackie Winsor piece – the construction is made out of destruction. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Since we are at the end of the tape, I'm going to stop the tape here and put in a new one. So we'll pause here.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Celia Muñoz on February 8th, 2004. This is session two and disc two. And we're just continuing. And Celia you had something you were going to continue –

MS. MUÑOZ: Going back to spirituality, or philosophy which fascinate me, and the mores, and how we are placed here and presented as being different because we occupy different areas of this planet that is so minuscule in this universe. And I can't lose sight of the significance and insignificance too. So there is room for differences, I strongly believe. There's room for differences.

You know, some people rely on saying "God is merciful." I think God is a prankster too, because we come in differences. We're the same, but different. Different color skin, stature, et cetera. Science comes along with the spiritual. And He gave us this tool, the mind, and then just let us loose to see if we could manage it. When I read Dante's *Inferno* in undergraduate, I was still coming off, spinning off from the Catholic doctrine. But questioning it already by then.

In examining that work, and the period in history that he wrote it, then applying it to what I had been fed – and always questioned. At that age, in my 20s, I had not experienced as much as I have now. And I could not believe his structure. The levels he presented and why greed was at the bottom. I thought maybe killing; doing away with a life would take precedence over that. But the underlying thing is greed, you know.

In applying Dante's theory, how does this sieve work? What falls through? What stays, you know? Because we all have the capacity. But society and technology are constructors too.

And you apply that knowledge and it ultimately informs the spiritual. And we are still fighting – separating those things, but they're so mashed. Look at what's happening politically now, the issue of religion in the schools and the forms that has taken, and how very conveniently you can apply some things and pass them as laws, when they weren't before. Yeah, greed. Greed is an informer

too, and a constructor too. [Laughs.]

It's this tragic human condition we carry with us. And the meaning, what's the meaning? Is it the act of sweeping or what you're thinking about as you sweep? Going back to [Allan] Kaprow. So it's crushing. It's compacting. It's about compacting information like your garbage compactor, and you turn out a nice cube.

MS. CORDOVA: Your books are your cubes. Your books are your compact packages.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah. And then you have to break that form, and that's what happened, as the pieces became larger and then you examine the issue of the object and whether you want to produce an object, or it's a negation of an object. I embraced doing away with the object for a while. And why? So that it would provide me mobility. That's when I did a lot of the installation work, and all I carried with me was a small folder with my images, my brushes, and ideas.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you consider your first installation?

MS. MUÑOZ: I started breaking the book form with *Tolido* and with *The Chameleon*, with *Sin Remedio*. It was still kind of bookish, and I think the larger installations were still bookish, even though they were just paintings on the wall. And the package became the structure, became the building, became the space, okay. I'm basically a formalist too, because it's applied to the walls do I not consider the form of the package, because architecture is inherent. How do I acknowledge the space, and move the viewer, to experience that, or learn from their approach. The first installation that did away completely with the object was *Rompiendo la Liga*, and it's a literal title, "Breaking the Binding." [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Just to sort of go back to the books for a second. Were you ever sort of – one of the troubles that I would consider with bookmaking, especially unique bookmaking, is that they actually become fairly inaccessible as a whole, and that only part can be reproduced in a catalogue, so you only see one page from that entire creation. Was that maybe part of the process, or could you speak a little about that problem?

MS. MUÑOZ: What became a challenge was how to document a piece, to be experienced in a catalogue, or to present it in my own portfolio, my slides. How can I win – come out winning that presentation if it is flat when this whole thing is so dimensional? Then it became too precious too, okay. So you look for avenues of making it more accessible.

Is that what you were after?

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MS. MUÑOZ: So, yeah, it had to move beyond that. It doesn't mean that I won't come back to it, but I don't like to repeat myself too often.

The jolly is in figuring out the initial process, and working through it. Then it becomes too mechanical. And unless they vary somewhat, I'm thinking about that because there's another big chapter, another time in my life that I could use as the tool for questioning, for continuing this examination.

MS. CORDOVA: Which time would that be?

MS. MUÑOZ: Whatever followed where I left off. I am also thinking very seriously of connecting the

work to the real history, and going into El Paso and presenting the history of El Paso through maybe my family's contribution. Because the success of the business, small businesses, like maybe the taxi service [started by my grandfather and continued by my uncle Severo], happened because of the economic and political times. It was World War II [when my uncle owned it], there was a base and a fort: an Army fort, an Air base. They had to move the GIs both within the city and across the border, because that's where they went for R&R.

So how much did that taxi company, how much money did it generate and play in the city? And then my grandfather's small hotel, how did it connect to the larger business map of El Paso? My grandmother's contribution to the building of the big church, Sacred Heart Church, with monetary contribution too. So you become part of the map. And I think that's important for my family, that's important for the Hispanic community, and that's important for the city of El Paso to acknowledge.

And when I started into doing residencies, that turned out to be installations and became more social and political, it was the power of the place, and the role people played to make it a place, to contribute. Social dynamics begins to creep in. And instead of being in a small package, you access, work with what that place offers you or what you want that place to acknowledge.

Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, foreign to me. But, the place informs Staten Island. It was an old decrepit mariner's retirement community. So what does that have to do with what it is now, and what does it have to do with the immediate community? And is there still a memory of what that was back then? What age would the citizens be? Discovered it was the retirees who still had memories of their childhood, when this thing was still functioning.

So it's acknowledging that place bringing the community into it and informing it. So I did meet with different retirement groups. And they provided some history, and that helped form the project. The viewer continued the process by leaving the stories, their own stories, on scrolls of paper.

The connecting thread materially, and formalistically – materially it stemmed from a tree [as in a family tree]. They had to be natural products: wood, paper that comes from wood, pencils that come from wood that write on paper. Making it into one package again, being informed by this richness of history and making history the ingredient. Still exploring form.

MS. CORDOVA: It seems to me there's the evolution where you're initially grappling with a lot of individual injustices or sort of the sense of personal enlightenment, and that gradually maybe there's this social justice evolution or component to your work. And where do you see that most visibly coming into play?

MS. MUÑOZ: Again, place. Site – there was a term that was very popular. Site-specific, but it's site-dependent too. And giving yourself a different problem, in different areas, and taking history with you – leaving history. For the Roswell Project, I was invited to help figure out how to bring the Hispanic community into the museum. And I said, "Well, you treat them like everybody else. You get to know them." [Laughter.]

I went into that project, starting more or less from the top, the leading Hispanic community and how they – helped shape Roswell, their role in Roswell. Still playing, grabbing, constructing, and deconstructing too, from what Roswell is known for. And it's known for this museum of Aliens, you know, little green people that came from outer space. But then this alienation element comes into play and injustice.

It was informed through written interviews I conducted through that month residency, collecting and

dusting, like a social archeologist. Taping, using salesmanship to win confidence, because there was a natural curiosity because it was going to be about them. Then the museum takes a different role, you know?

They become the project. They become part of that constituency. Where did those people come from, okay? So you begin to peel these layers. And how many people – who do you want to bring into the museum? Is it only the leading constituency or is it the masses?

Okay, is it all the residents? And how do you access all these different groups? Going into the public schools too, to see if there is cognizance, consciousness, awareness about what they are doing in Roswell, where their parents work, the industry are they contributing to, then they become an ingredient. They're not just kids going to school, but kids who have parents that work in this industry that's building [an image of] Roswell. It's this unfolding, and breaking.

How did they first land in Roswell? You know, because it was pretty barren, people from the surrounding communities were lured by industry. They started coming down from these villages. And I construct that in the small narrative. "Once upon a time, these people and other people came down from" – [laughs]. The dairy industry, for one, lures them in, and so these stories become part of the map.

Kids, the young kids, the younger generation is more technologically informed. They're already working with computers. They're looking with video. Their technological vocabulary, those ingredients are in the educational process.

So let's use the tools available and go to different schools and get the schools to dialogue by ultimately presenting a video that is made by the school children, their information, and then accessing the office of the media department. Then they're all coming together. It's this communal thing. It's this gathering activity that becomes the main tool. The kids – they're using the contemporary tools. The older generation had more verbal interaction. But there's a big difference between, the information – the awareness. Even though they're more technologically savvy, they're still young and they're still not aware.

The collection of portraits was the second element. Most of my works don't have people, and this was the first one that used people as subjects. It started creeping into the installation work, when I would draw figures, faceless figures, not complete. But then the portraits and the people became part of the installation. How do you access everybody? You go and reach all the different clubs, like the sports clubs. Anybody that has contributed and made Roswell what it is. So we had a large turnout. We collected trophies from all the different sports clubs. So that brought that segment and the different schools and their families.

Every museum has an educational program, but to have the village become the project was very meaningful. And left a residue – Capp Street Project, San Francisco.

MS. CORDOVA: What year was that?

MS. MUÑOZ: That was '94. I had started dialogue with them before the time to go. And again, the early public art, *Sentimental Journey*, used travel as an informant because – travel informs, and shapes. *El Limite* also used travel as an element. You know, having had that mobility and then moving away, and what happens with people of means? What do they do? They move and travel.

So I built that ingredient into the work. *Sentimental Journey* has that in the title. I used the World

War II era as one ingredient. Phoenix, it talks about Phoenix. The art is, for Phoenix, for the airport, and that's a people mover. For me it had to address that. It had to speak about mass transportation but have an undertow of World War II and Arizona's role in that war. Complexity, again. The first ship sunk at Pearl Harbor was the USS Arizona. All right, so let's build into that Pacific image. The woman that's painted is [a South Pacific pin-up] a little piece of Nose Art. It's about the South Pacific involvement.

And Capp Street was about San Francisco – who is lured to San Francisco, and is it a natural migratory path? We know that El Norte – was the avenue and continues to be. We still get movement from South America and Mexico up into the states. But not only due to the issue of race – which is inherent in Capp Street project because I am Hispanic and because the kids – the group I wanted to address and work with are Hispanic kids that moved from Texas to San Francisco because of what San Francisco represents and endorses, embraces, accepts and that's the gay sector, the gay community.

A young man, David Contreras, was a student at RISD. And he had seen the 1991 Whitney Biennial, I think that's when he first saw my work. He was very sophisticated, and managed to get my number. So he called and he told me he was from Brownsville and responded to the work and maybe could I send him some slides because he was starting a slide collection – or adding to the slide collection at RISD. That's how the dialogue started.

He later, very agilely, too, got internships in San Francisco and worked with Carmen Lomas Garza and Amalia Mesa-Bains. By that time I had already done *Rompiendo la Liga*. He continues his research and followed the work. And then, next thing I know, when I'm doing – “Revelaciones,” the Cornell project [“Revelaciones/ Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence” at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, fall 1993] – Chon Noriega curated at Cornell University. And David came as an assistant to Amalia Mesa-Baines who was one of the artists.

So we connected – we really connected. I had to go to New York City to examine the ongoing process of a public art I was doing there for one of the schools, with New York Percent for Art and the school construction authority. So I had to hop on the bus and go down. Since I had no object for that Cornell project – it was a collaboration between Daniel Martinez and myself and it was using the whole building as a beacon. That was in place so I had free time.

David asked if he could accompany me. So we became well acquainted on the trip down. He knew his way around New York too so he went his way, I went my way and we hopped on the bus and continued on the way back. He informed me about his attitude, his philosophy, why he was going to school. He's a very intelligent young man and he happened to be gay. And he wanted to help me with one of the projects.

So I started connecting dots and then I found out his brother was a doctoral candidate at Stanford University in I believe literature and modern studies, another real bright young man, Daniel Contreras, also gay. I said, okay, that's what the project is going to be about, and there's dialogue that necessitates it be endorsed, examined, and explored. And there is that migratory route, so it's social dynamics to politics with that project.

The testimony, writing letters started before I went to do the residency, where I stayed a month. We start dialogue with letters and it's this unraveling and discovering of themselves. All those letters were returned and we went through a creative writing workshop where they themselves extrapolated –

MS. CORDOVA: "They" being?

MS. MUÑOZ: The students themselves. They extracted the most meaningful parts, edited their own work, and then I took them through my own approach to writing. Their testimony had to be condensed to maybe one or two lines, short paragraphs. And these were used throughout the gallery. They went up on the wall and since, you know, those residencies provide you with a budget I opted to present a game room. And it was a new game. "A brand new ball game." That's what it was called.

And the fact that this generation is still struggling with gender issues, but they're – we're not in the '50s anymore. They're more up front. They come out younger. And they start to wrestle with that earlier, there's acknowledgment. So that becomes – that's the game. That's the new game.

I constructed a 14 foot square chessboard platform and the squares were pink and blue. The chess pieces were life-size, and the viewers could move them and play the game. But my original formation was not the pawns, that wall of protection in the front and the kings and queens in the back, but instead the kings and queens were in the front and the pawns were in the back. So how do you play this game now?

And there were several games. Three sets of vocabulary blocks, eight feet long each. Emanating that little parlor game with words on every face of a cube and you make your own sentences. But the kids and I went through the exercise of formulating sentences that might be pertinent to three different vocabularies that look like they're separate but they're all related.

There was a pink set of eight blocks, blue set, and lavender set. The blue set was sex and medical words – AIDS is prevalent. So that comes into the vocabulary, and a lot of Spanish and English words. I mix it. The pink one is religion and culture. And of course the lavender is self-evident. It was coming-out terminology, and you could move them.

The third game was emanating a pre-Colombian pyramid. The ball game was a video projection and designed using the codex. I worked with a music composer in the Haight Ashbury. It's a short loop tape. But instead of me dictating exactly the timing of the movement of those pieces like chess or checkers, the goal was for the player to reach the top. But then following what happened in those ancient games, many times that winner was the one sacrificed. And tumbles down – the movement is downward.

But I worked with this tech kid and being that he was a musical composer, I told him approach it like a piece of music. You establish the rhythm. It's working with what is available too. So that was a video projection. It was a large slanted platform and simulated steps, a "pyramid," with "steps."

And the last game was a ready made. It was foosball.

MS. CORDOVA: A ready made?

MS. MUÑOZ: A ready made. It was foosball and we rearranged the players; we took the foosball game apart and you construct your own game. And the main story in the project –was about my Uncle Edi who was gay. I told the story about how his lean was not negated but it wasn't endorsed. His story is there along with his contribution to the family, which was really exoticism and the beauty and the joy he brought into the family.

I have a nephew that's gay, my sister's kid and his testimony was used and he participated. My sister was having a very hard time with his coming out then. She attended – she helped with the

installation, interacted with the kids. That opened up the door so it's all these dynamics of traversing – *The Power of Place* was an entrance piece and that was the very first public art to use travel as informant, as a shaper.

MS. CORDOVA: The one in LA.?

MS. MUÑOZ: One in LA.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, how did – how did that project start?

MS. MUÑOZ: I was invited to be part of the design group for this wonderful master design project of Dolores Hayden [*The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995] who was at UCLA's architecture and urban planning graduate studies a professor, now she's at Yale. She had this beautiful approach to public art, which I truly endorse, and that's giving the power to a place, mining the history of L.A. through women's contribution, women of different ethnic origin. The first was the "Biddy Mason Project," about a black woman who became an activist, was a slave, did the march, reached L.A., became a midwife, real estate holder and an activist. That was already in place.

The second, "The Embassy Project," was about the Latino sector, and the role women played in the labor unionization during the '30s and '40s, in LA – seamstress and the cannery women. There was Rupert Garcia and myself, two women architects and a historian. Vicki Ruiz [*Cannery women, cannery lives : Mexican women, unionization, and the California food processing industry, 1930-1950*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987] was the first one and she had to bow out, her dad fell ill. And then George Sanchez came into the project.

But we were faced with the issue of having a building that did not meet earthquake standards and the project was going to be shelved because we couldn't do anything to the building. We couldn't produce something to adhere to it. So I volunteered to do a book. I said, just fund it and I'll take full responsibility. I'll write it, design it, you know, see the production end. And so that was allowed and then it became part of the reading material in a reading room – that acknowledged that activity in that multipurpose building. It was Methodist – you know, very progressive and you know the history.

So the importance in using that approach to public art instead of just embellishing, but endorsing and mining the contribution of different sectors. Of how a city is planned, how it is structured due to industry, and then how industry responds.

The third one is the "Little Tokyo Project," and that's about the flower market industry in LA. That's Japanese contribution.

MS. CORDOVA: I was just going to ask you, not only was this your first introduction to public art, but it was your first introduction to all the obstacles that you encounter in public art –

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: – I would say, simply because this project was very limited in terms of if you want to look at success or failure.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right, the controversy that goes with that facet of art-making. But the early advertising sessions, you know, came into play really well because you have to think on your feet. You have meetings where you have to think on the spot, do the problem solving then and there.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you and Rupert able to collaborate at all or was that not part of the project?

MS. MUÑOZ: He's such a dear, you know. What he did was produce the poster for the conference; from the images we were presented. We became good friends, from a distance. All of us had to come up with a proposal for the design, and all of them were, of course, rejected. There was a conference where we all spoke along with professors of Chicano history; a meaningful step in that process. So as far as collaboration, not that direct.

MS. CORDOVA: In terms of what was rejected, was that your proposal for the sidewalk, to put imprints on the sidewalk?

MS. MUÑOZ: I came in with metal cut outs of the faces of the three women for the arches. And well, several other people did something similar. Some wanted a sort of a marquis or something on the sidewalk. The architects, came in, one of them with a really dynamic hanging lobby piece. Mine was more – like the paintings I was doing at that time, kind of silhouetted shapes. I forget what Rupert's was.

But, no, we didn't collaborate. And the only traces, the only evidence of that project is that the conference took place. Rupert made the poster and I made the book, *If Walls Could Speak/ Si las Paredes Hablaran*. And it's in Dolores' book, *The Power of Place*.

MS. CORDOVA: Are you pleased, at least, with that book? Are you content with that part of the process?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, yes. I was able to continue, you know, it's recorded history and it's packaged. The content of the book – there are two narrative lines, one on the top and one on the bottom. The top one is the building – giving the history of the building and the bottom is about a child whose mother was a seamstress, so it's more direct testimony. And then there are images and excerpts from the activity, direct testimony of women who worked, as part of a labor force.

The injustices with that industry or with labor per se, and early unionization and the fact that Latino women were organized to strike, was a major step. Nobody thought, even the organizers that it would succeed because Latinas were traditionally more homebody. But it did happen, the strike did occur and that's what the book documents. It testifies to the maltreatment, sexism and testimony – and the ultimate goal – is that education and knowledge is power, okay? There's always some hope built into – the projects; to have that as an ingredient, because it doesn't stop, we can't continue.

MS. CORDOVA: I see it as – that project as the beginning of a chain of other projects in some way dealing with the garment industry and fabrics. I also see it as one of the first projects where I can see a link with your mother and her personal history in your work, and maybe could you just talk about the chain of developing that thread?

MS. MUÑOZ: It is very good to speak about mom's role too because she had a strong influence in my life. We spoke a lot about my grandmother, but mom's sense of adventure and confidence and tenacity. She's very experimental, very experimental. Like I told you, an avid reader too, very spirited, and worked, became part of the labor force. That becomes important later on.

I picked that up later in another installation called *Fibra y Furia* – *Fibra* was the original installation – done for Center for the Arts in San Francisco – a critique on the fashion industry, again, examining advertising. The fashion industry and how it constructs women or the image of women. Since the

Drawing Center project and the “Embassy Project” – I had been exploring the feminization of poverty.

I had been reading a book on, we’re beginning to see teen suicide on the rise and young girls became important. My daughter was around that age too. So, yes, life is an ingredient that’s part of a bigger picture and we are a product of our times.

So this book [Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Putnam, 1994] on young girls’ testimony and Shakespeare’s Ophelia who, ultimately drowned herself assisted by the weight of her garment. I wove this strange tale and used fabric per se as an element, bolts and bolts of fabric – many donated by the fashion industry in San Francisco. So, you know, it’s like the snake eating its tail, and I design a series of garments that speak about the sexualization of the female.

The Center hires a seamstress from the San Francisco Opera to construct the dresses. And I know that in fashion, what is shocking? Nothing. Everything has been done, so then I center on maybe the rites of passage and starting with a very sexy Pampers, through a toddler in very seductive fabrics, to the teen years, with G-string sequin cut-offs, to the prom dress strategically emphasized in the breast, the crotch and the pompís in the back – then the picture becomes more expanded. And we go into – there’s a rise – I mean, it’s always happened but there’s more exposure to child abuse, all right?

And transsexual and transgender issues are addressed too, some of the garments are ready-mades embellished. Briefs that are treated like tutus or a man’s suit with lapels made of like baby pajama fabric – this is arrested development. And then a candyman’s cape, a large cape, has hundreds of pockets and lots of candies stuck in them. The big gallery which had been for group exhibitions was offered as the first solo show. It was immense, a big challenge, but it became so experiential [sic], it wasn’t something you went and looked at but something you walked through. The viewer becomes part of that scene. I saw the garments and the fabrics as bait, the design as bait, as lures, in this underwater journey; this Ophelia thing. And the viewer could walk through the installation and become part of either the fish that swam in that ambience and later part of the installation was turned into a digital photograph where we go more overtly into this fire and water – life thing, but it still is a lure.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, the digital photograph actually has images of fish in it.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. And who do I employ, because I’m not that savvy with the technology, who at that time could be engaged in the process that would give meaning to that issue, my daughter, Anna, who was a digital photo-video-computer major at U of H [University of Houston] then.

She was rebellious, just like I was, and we became connected through this piece – reconnected again. It had been kind of tense for a while, but she had become aware that her interest was in the field too. So she helped to produce that photograph later when I combined *Fibra* with *Furia*. Another installation done at another place at the Irving Arts Center, also a very large space – very tall, very large. This installation became a tool and part of the ingredient for another topic.

I had been collecting newspaper clippings for a couple of years and watchful of the situation across the border with the young women that are killed, the Maquilas, they called – now they call Maquila-lucas, or the fresas. It’s this abuse issue again and societal irresponsibility, and the fact that they became disposable and that it became a norm really compelled me, provoked me to say something. I approached the Irving Arts Center and they embraced it right away.

Some of the garments that didn't have much meaning in this dialogue were edited out. New were the digital photographs, *La Sirena*, which is the mermaid or the siren, still playing with language. Another photograph, *Furia*, uses another garment, and that's the installation shot of the sheath with two buttons in the breast area, a large digital photograph, same size, 60 by 40 inches. This one deals more directly with location, I locate that dress right on the border. Images of the dwellings of Juarez shacks are in the foreground, and El Paso's skyline in the background. There's a chain link fence on the left-hand side and skull with feathers, like a fetish, like a ritual, which is part of that big problem in that we don't know just exactly who and why they're being killed. A lot of talk is about ritualistic practices.

And there's an explosion – there's a volcano at the very top where you feel like it has gone too far, beyond. A large sandbox was built for the installation. I wanted the whole gallery to be a sandy dune, like the sandy lots where these girls' bodies are found. But the gallery is carpeted so it has not been presented as such, yet.

A large sandbox is constructed, which takes it back – there's different connotations to it, and we collect shoes, and being an article of clothing it is the hinge for *Fibra* to become "*Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in vogue.*" In the reportage of the killings there is often mention of whether the body was shoeless, whether one shoe was off, so that becomes my hinge, and we collect shoes that were ultimately donated to women's shelters.

There is a big altar-type setting for the third photograph, it's not so much a collage like the digital photographs; it is more direct testimony. It is a photograph of a woman's legs, the bottom part of a woman's legs face down emanating how some of these girls were found. I made the photograph to emanate the reportage. And testimony from different publications, from the newspapers accompanying the image, and it is actual testimony. I don't compose, I don't write anything; it's using actual testimony.

It goes from a paragraph describing the murder in large typeface and succeeding paragraphs. Each one becomes smaller. At the bottom, the caption under the image is a just a body count, because that's the way it was sometimes reported.

MS. CORDOVA: I don't want to break in but I think this tape is almost done so I'm going to stop it, and hopefully we can start a new tape.

MS. MUÑOZ: Good.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Celia Muñoz. It is February 8th, 2004, and this is session two and disk three. We're just discussing the fashion industry, and we took a quick break and in that break, Celia, you just brought me a whole host of books that you used to conduct your research, from various authors, including the *Reviving Ophelia* book that you mentioned, but also Camille Paglia [*Sex, art, and American culture : essays* New York : Vintage Books, 1992.], and, let's see, the *Sex and Suits* [Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: the Evolution of Modern Dress*. New York: Knopf, 1994] book that I think you thought was very influential for you. Would you like to talk about your process as a researcher and the level of research that you develop for your projects?

MS. MUÑOZ: Sometimes it's through reading, and in this case, yes, *Reviving Ophelia* was the first

one, this other list of books informs the attitude and helped shape the project. In instances I collect testimony right from the individuals; in others I go to my reading sources in exploration.

Sex and Suits, the attitude of selling the body and of course Camille Paglia, who is such a feminist, whose writing I agree with to a degree that's worth exploring and *Reading the Body Politic* and then centering more on Shakespeare and dating violence and women's abuse – but then feminists as constructors. But I love – the big jolly of the projects is that rigor of research.

MS. CORDOVA: How would you say your consciousness of becoming a feminist emerged, if you would call yourself a feminist?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, I believe it is the unconscious thinking, I was brought up in a home of strong women, number one, and the '60s of course has to play a strong role in shaping most anybody who went through that period. But atypical because Latinas at that point were slowly emerging, but – armed now with the art process and that spirit of exploration guided me, propelled me and fed – early on in graduate work too I started examining my role, my own immediate role, and the juggling act that homemakers, women, married women have had to deal with, and that became a commodity for the work.

I mentioned the fact that my mother was part of the labor force. That informed it too. And Gloria Steinem and all the feminists that I watched avidly during that period in history, during the late-night TV – [laughs] – talk shows, and the writings were of course very necessary, I think, if you were of that age. I came in a little late because – Steinem might be maybe about my age or a bit younger, but again being that observer, yet, wanting to become a part of, a participant, and examining the injustice connected to that. Yes, I wanted to burn my bra at that time – [laughs] – and did.

MS. CORDOVA: And did.

MS. MUÑOZ: So, yeah. Active observer and participant at the time brings meaning to the work. It's social bent, this politician, aspect. When I first met Lucy Lippard I had to pick her up at the airport for a conference here at UTA. I was teaching part time there, and had read *The Center* [Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: feminist essays on women's art*. New York: Dutton and Co., Inc., 1976], her books, and I was thrilled to go pick her up. And I asked her about her evolution and she responded – I think I asked her maybe about her role as an art historian and she said she was more politician than historian, and she fervently is, especially that book, the *Lure of the Local* [Lucy Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: The New Press, 1997] – when she presents the art activity that is social event, more communal. She wrote the brochure statement for my Roswell project and placed the project in the *Lure of the Local*. And testimony from one of the Roswell citizens, Steve Gonzales, a plumber, and activist, not formally schooled to the degree that Foucault is – or was. Their testimonies are presented on the same page as introduction – [laughs] – to the book, which I thought was very insightful of Lucy – Miss Lippard.

So what else?

MS. CORDOVA: I'd like to know, just because you've also been talking about living in two different worlds and in many different situations, and in the early '90s when the world is looking for Latino artists or Latino artists are trying to establish their presence in the art world, and you are sort of being connected within that community, but also you've been following a tradition that is of a very wide sphere, just as a general artist, and maybe you could talk about sort of being just an artist or being a Latino artist, and the challenges or opportunities that are part of that experience.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, I was not aware – in graduate school I was not aware that this wave was being shaped that this wave was rolling in. No, and I did not make the works with that in mind because I knew, and I think about it – I mean, I was exploring, like I told you, these other theories and these other forms. But timing – timing, you know, positioning is so important too in how you fall in a wave of history, during a period of history.

I finished graduate school in 1982 and continued exploring the book form, very deliberately wanting to expose the books on both coasts. I knew by then that you had to have that endorsement. I was very lucky; very fortunate that some good exhibitions – book art exhibitions were being formed that fit – that embraced book arts, too. And one was “At Home [“At Home: A Decade of Women’s Art”]” for the Museum at Long Beach, and it was expansive, and I knew that the East Coast was important, too. So I started plugging into places like the Center for Book Arts in New York.

Meanwhile, Hamady [Walter Hamady, Professor of Art, University of Wisconsin. “Breaking the Bindings: American Book Art Now.” Elvehjem Museum of Art. 1983] from the Midwest was looking at that form, too, and the books were accepted – the works were accepted in catalog exhibitions right away. So I was fortunate. That placed them in line with the activity that was to follow. My first contact with the continuance of the movimiento through art was a conference conducted in Austin at UT – where Women and Their Work [where I met artist Santa Barraza, who was, for me, a catalyst to the Latino arts community] did a show in the library at the university. In conjunction with this conference they brought some Latino figures. Judy Baca was one of the speakers. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto was part. Sylvia Orozco, who now directs the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, was part of the audience, too [None of whom I had met before].

So, the book works went in through a feminist group, Women and Their Works, but extended into this new dialogue. And I found out that I had to send my slides to different people on the West Coast that were looking for Hispanic, Latinas, Chicanas – Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Sifra Goldman. And so I did, and then these other exhibitions started rolling in – all these were precursor to 1992, which was the quincentenary celebration of – or addressing, not celebrating – depends on which side of the fence you are on – of the Conquest [1492], okay? [Laughs.]

So – it was very exciting, too, and before I knew it, this word, “multiculturalism,” appeared, and I said, “Well, I think I have been doing that for awhile” – unknowingly, and maybe the works will fit there, too. So, let’s get as much mileage as we can from these pieces and see, you know, how they fit in and whether they fit in. Judy Bacas’ process really intrigued me because it was community bent. She is a social excavator, and I love the fact that her assistants – the young people she trained had to go through this rigorous research, too, in order to design. Kin to the education process I had employed back in the 60s. It was going into a process knowing what you are going to paint in this muralist approach. She made the social mural – social – yeah. Going back to that discipline, and the Mexican muralists – which I had just touched upon in undergraduate. I did take a couple history of Mexican art classes, undergraduate and graduate school.

So, these exhibitions started surfacing and opening doors. The dialogue was fascinating because it went back to the ‘60s activism. I started to do my research on the movement – and where was I during that time, you know? Just to come in more informed, and then this whole new group of artists came to my attention – Amalia Mesa-Bains, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the Border Arts Workshop, et cetera. When I taught part-time after graduate school at UT Arlington, Guillermo was brought in as a performance artist by Jeff Kelly who graduated from San Diego, who knew the whole – [laughs] – story of the Border Arts Workshop.

So, my god – I mean, that, in conjunction with Laurie Andersen, whom I had seen in graduate school,

with other performance artists, along with the installations like Judy Pfaff, and all that wonderful branch, ethnically bent in all directions became just really exciting information. But I saw that it was leading up to something and that that had to end, too – had to, you know, and let's see how much life that had and whether it could live beyond 1992, all right? I knew that it was the big, grand sweeping fashion and the large institutions were embracing that dialogue.

An exhibition titled the “Ceremony of Memory,” funded by the Lannan Foundation, opened more doors, the work, not being derivatively Chicana, but having an element of it. But being more conceptual, I think, was accepted in some of these exhibitions because of the makeup of the panel selection that had a wider view, okay? Not only was it the Chicana dialogue, or Hispanic dialogue, or ethnicity and identity issues but the works were conceptual. So, whomever was in the selecting panels that had that background made the work fit, which sometimes stood out – like the “CARA [Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985. UCLA's Wright Gallery, 1990]” exhibition.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. You don't feel your work fit into the CARA exhibition.

MS. MUÑOZ: I learned that – through the reviews that somehow the work was singled out, you know, as not being extremely derivative or having this other element. So it just kind of confirmed, you know, the production and my examination. In some of these selection processes, I learned that it was not totally accepted, but it was through the selection panel, made to fit in.

What was most interesting is that – many artists were mining – they're going back to their past and trying to find – to see if there was any link to any of these other groups that were called minority groups, okay? And before I knew it, it was like everybody discovered their grandmother – [laughs] – or maybe they were part Indian, when that had never been, Native American, or maybe they had Spanish blood? And several artists changed even their names so they could fit in that dialogue. Art is trendy, okay? And so, many artists are initiators, some are followers, and just like in crime – you know, there is a lot of copycats, and lots of altar-building started surfacing. You know, of course, Amalia [Mezar Baines] is the champion there. She started exploring with that form early on. Formalized it [and theorized it, and politicized it].

Enlightenment #1, done before this dialogue, is about the grandmother building altars. And a lot of artists started using exotic materials, constructing with them.

MS. CORDOVA: Which piece did you include in “Ceremony of Memory?”

MS. MUÑOZ: Several went into that one. [Audio break, tape change.] I think two of the boxes. *The Ave Maria Purisima, La Honey, La Tempestad, The Chameleon* and *Tolido*, was finalized as an installation piece – for “Ceremony of Memory.” For “CARA,” only #4, *Which Came First?* was selected.

MS. CORDOVA: Which perhaps has had the most written about it, thus far. Is that an accurate statement?

MS. MUÑOZ: I kind of think so. And, speaking about getting mileage out a piece, that has gone everywhere. It's traveled all over Africa. It could be understood, you know? [Laughs.] For the Center for the Book Arts in New York exhibition, “Book Art of the United States”, but the “it” piece fit into the “CARA” show.

MS. CORDOVA: But even though it was clearly – I see it as clearly grappling with issues of identity, issues of language, biculturalism, you still don't see it as necessarily fitting into whatever the

mission was of the CARA exhibition.

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, it wasn't conceived for that. It's a work that deals with perception and lies, all right – lies of photography. The question is what is truth, what is real, and the role the camera plays in that argument. I just used that story, as the vehicle for that piece.

MS. CORDOVA: And your grandmother's statement – how did she put it –

MS. MUÑOZ: It's sex education, which is really outmoded by now. When I was curious as to how a chicken laid an egg, and she would tell me that it came from its mouth, its beak, and the story says that I would sit attentively for hours to see if I could witness the event and that is reality, that's the eye in operation, and that unfortunately they were just too fast for me.

A photographer is behind the lens, okay? So it's constructed. The picture presents a row of eggs that are in line, one behind the other, and you take it for granted that you are seeing a row of eggs of equal size. Here perspective comes into play. You see – objects that are closer to you appear to be larger, when in actuality they are not. If you take your hands, when you put one in front of your face the other one looks smaller. You know, they are the same size. And you think you are looking at just a line of eggs that come from one carton, but in the last image you will see that they are, in actuality, of different sizes. So, you know, what is real? *Which came first?* And the language issue. The verb. The lie. [Inaudible.] Perfect. For that it's just perfect. [Laughter.]

I was turning a curb when that came to mind. I was driving and I was turning a curb and the whole thing just fused, and I remember I made a note, because I always carry a pencil. And quickly, I synthesized the whole thing: this is like a puff of light these pieces just fit together really well. I have a practice when I am problem solving, or when an idea comes. Sometimes it's before opening my eyes, like the first waking moment, and this problem is arranged there in space and I can see the pieces, and then in motion they fall. They start to fall and then they start to find a place. And then they fit. And then I don't dare stir until they all fall into place. And then I wake up. And I write it down. Sometimes they come that way, but it's this place, this arrangement of things, and then it's locking. And I loved puzzles as a kid, too, three-dimensional puzzles.

I had an uncle that had a plastic ball of pieces of different colors, I loved that piece. So it's that type of mental activity that's very visual, at the same time conceptualized in figure.

MS. CORDOVA: Sometimes you seem to treat language like a puzzle, and where did you sort of build that skill for signs and language and then the multiple meanings of words?

MS. MUÑOZ: I think it's the ability to speak two languages – not only to speak but to think in two languages, and each language brings its own set of rules, and inferences and I think it's the ability to think that way – and then all that wit and cleverness, you know, from my – the family was language bent and they're articulate, maybe the reading, the early reading, the respect for the written word, and just that natural tendency to write, and the copywriting – all of that. Like I told you, nothing is lost. *Which Came First*, what is it – what is it?

No, it's just the love; it's just the natural respect for the word. That's it. That's it.

MS. CORDOVA: I guess going back a step, in line with this sort of construction of – not construction but the building of a Latino artist community, how has that influenced your artwork? Do you feel that it has shaped the direction of your work?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. Yes. Going into the residency work, a lot of times it's Hispanic or Latino groups –

there was a whole other world to explore, to continue exploring, not losing sight of your discipline, your affinity to the art dialogue. It's wanting to do everything at once. It's trying to keep both feet and my hands, in these other areas. Yes, the art world expanded. The notion of the art world expanded certainly by engaging and knowing and forming these wonderful friendships, with the artists, exploring their mission, examining their dialogue, and still seeking those that want to break ground, like Daniel Martinez. [Laughs.] All right? Yes, still very much alert to – the new – the younger generation who is writing – documenting and interpreting the work.

I have always wanted an ampler – picture being written, and I thought that we would have to wait for the second generation to come in with a bigger picture, a bigger base, to present a more complex history. And it has to continually grow. Now the watchful thing is how much will it dissipate? How much will it become absorbed, okay? We see that through fashion too, and music. It's very exciting to see the new, the younger kids explore – deal with – or just negate their ethnicity. Some don't want to fit into the dialogue. They say "I'm an artist," you know? Or "I'm a photographer and it's, what I'm doing. I don't want to be labeled." And there's room for that, too. There's room for that and then there's danger because who was it that made that very clever piece of sculpture? [Claes] Oldenburg's, big eraser – remember that *Typewriter Eraser* [National Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.]? Well I think there's the big erasure happening – because part of that history will be lost. I think that's why this is so important, what you and the Smithsonian are doing now to capture it before it dissipates. That's why I did the San Antonio project too. "Semejantes/Personajes" with that community. Where else in Texas but in San Antonio do we have the largest community of Latino artists to document, to make portraits of these living artists that, you know, we will lose and to capture them at this time –

MS. CORDOVA: You're very much a documentarian. I see that now and a couple of your projects I really see as an attempt to sort of document a particular community. We talked a lot about Roswell, but there's also the "Lana Sube, Lana Baja" project that I think you did with the street signs.

MS. MUÑOZ: That came out of the *Postales* –

MS. CORDOVA: And the, the *Postales* –

MS. MUÑOZ: - the *Postales*.

MS. CORDOVA: - were a product of the Chamizal –

MS. MUÑOZ: Right, right, right.

MS. CORDOVA: - Treaty.

MS. MUÑOZ: It's this façade, you know. It's this notion of façades and of constructors and of the assimilation that takes place and one dear writer called it the "Chamizalization of the U.S." – [laughter] – which I thought was really clever – Dianne Solis of Dallas Morning News. City planning, politics, displacement. The Chamizal Treaty in El Paso. A 100 year dispute over a section of land. I think 600 acres. It's a strip that is on the border next to the river that was originally Mexico's that became the U.S. because of the way rivers evolve, alright? What was Mexico's became the United States'. That section, that strip, was developed. Families lived, schools were built – along that section. And then the dispute surfaced again during the Kennedy years and it was given back to Mexico. So all the families were displaced, moved throughout the city, and the evidence was visible in many, many instances.

MS. CORDOVA: Aww.

MS. MUÑOZ: What they do is bring themselves into this new area and I started seeing that. Physically evident. Homes became a manifestation. They took with them, you know, their, their, themselves. They took their culture, their approach to treating their environment, embellishing their environment. And so you see sections of El Paso that were originally just white become these mixed neighborhoods, or predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods.

How do we know this? The houses become hybrid. They either build a façade, what was maybe a stucco house becomes a brick house, has a layer of brick, ornate fences go up, yard art pops up, the color of the houses change. Instead of muted tones they become this other octave of coloration, uh huh.

And so I began to document that. I took pictures of these houses – that's just a real good study in demographics, how a city changes, and why a city changes, where, and how it moves, the evidence of the sprawl. Not only did I take pictures in El Paso, but I came to Fort Worth and I started noticing that too. And so I took some there and I went to Dallas, took some there; to Houston; to San Antonio. And so I had this collection of evidence.

And the art piece turned out to be a small folded accordion postcard book called *Postales*, which are postcards. And I write something about each house. But I connect it to art history. Like maybe a house that uses bathtubs as planters, I connect a Duchamp-ian attitude to that. And then I try to give evidence of the activity that takes place inside the house. I construct these little narratives about each dwelling. But they're constructed, alright? I make these up.

When Ron Gleason from the Tyler Museum of Art gave me my first opportunity for a first solo museum show. I reached back to the *Postales* and I had always envisioned a bigger, life-size photo project. But I didn't have the means to produce them large, photographically. So, I turned to painting and airbrush. Taught myself how to airbrush, and took that documentation a step further because of the tool, the airbrush. I had being groomed on, the Vargas girls and the Spearmint, airbrush advertisements. It cleans up. You airbrush to perfect a photograph, so they're kind of hazy romantic, they're not crisp. They're not photo-realistic. They emanate that. They're photographically derived, but I airbrush and keep them – kind of like hand colored postcards, old postcard souvenirs.

The installation is a series of houses and I evolved another narrative. Then it's three narratives in one. I think constructively and deconstructively, too, with form. Will this body of work show somewhere else? Will all be accommodated? Can it be broken up and presented in parts? Let's make it so that can happen. Then, you get more mileage out of the work, out of the project.

So I built an environment – with three-dimensional street signs I have fabricated, intersections, north intersecting south. And again, it's about language. It's street names from El Paso, from San Antonio, from Austin, and the mispronunciation of Spanish names by not-Spanish speakers, or English names by not-English speakers. And you get "Guadalooop" intersecting Guadalupe Street. You get "Muertos" intersecting Myrtle. In El Paso, I would always hear that street referred to as "La Calle Muertos." It's "Myrtle," okay? [Laughter.] In California, "Los Gate-os" instead of Los Gatos, alright? [Laughter.] So all this fun, this humor is built into that installation.

But I will take you so far into those homes. If you look very closely, none have doorknobs. You can step just to a fair distance. And the narrative – there's 16 canvasses – combination of the houses and the scrolls. The scrolls, like a giant children's storybook with illustrations of insects. They're all gardens. Hybrid insects illustrate each scroll, and the story is about aspiration, about tenacity, about

assimilation.

“I always wanted to live in a house with a porch and a garden in the front yard. Our garden had always been in the back surrounded by a tall adobe wall.” The narrative goes like that. And about a little girl – and the garden producing flowers to be offered for the ritual of May, a church ritual, where little girls offer flowers to the Virgin Mary, in which I participated as a child. You all go dressed in white dresses and white veils, like little brides, or like First Communion. I write that one girl, “took an orange dress and everybody laughed. But she stayed on anyway. And by the end of the service everybody had overlooked her mistake.” Okay, that’s tenacity. Standing your ground even though you were different, even though you did not fit in, ‘cause it ultimately will happen.

And then I go into more play about how we learned English. “Many times” I said, “She stayed and we played this game, “Los Encantados” the enchanted ones in the church grounds.” Or “Floren Diches, Floren Down.” The other was “El Zapone.” The former was “London Bridge is falling down.” The latter, “Here comes a pony.” [Sings “Floren diches, floren down, floren down” the song.] Okay, we used to make it up – [laughter]. It’s the way English sounded.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MS. MUÑOZ: And the insects are all hybrids. Like a grasshopper is part cricket but it’s fused so well that it looks like, you know, either a cricket or a grasshopper. You don’t know, but you think you’re looking at either. Again, what’s real, what isn’t, uh-huh, what’s reality.

The last two produced that fit that category was “Lana Sube, Lana Baja,” but that was commissioned for the Lannan Museum of Art, the one in Florida that is no longer there. The Lannan, already knew my work from the “Ceremony of Memory.” I’m invited, I think I’m like the fourth artist – Sol LeWitt, nice company, and [Tom] Otterness, who did the permanent lobby installation, Vernon [Fisher]; and then I. And the nice thing was that I got to keep the piece. It was two more houses, one was an adobe desert dwelling, one-story, the other a two-story, coastal dwelling. Painted very colorful. One is desert, one is coastal. The museum was in Florida, not far from the water. I come from the desert; that’s my origin. One is one-story, the other is two-stories. It’s about advancing, it’s progressing. The lobby was the entrance – it was a theater originally – and the floor slanted, one wall is higher than the other one. So I played to the site. And for that I translate an old jump rope rhyme: “Hilitos, Hilitos de Oro,” “Little Golden Threads.” And it’s about the up and down motion: “Lana Sube, Lana Baja is really a riddle. It is “Lana Sube, Lana Baja, el Señor que la trabaja” – what is that? “La navaja.” It’s the knife that cuts, alright? That was a childhood riddle. It has street signs too. So that’s how I think of a place or project. Informed by what’s there – [laughter] – and where that is.

MS. CORDOVA: I’m aware that I’ve kept you talking a really long time – [laughter].

MS. MUÑOZ: What time is it?

MS. CORDOVA: It’s – 1:40.

MS. MUÑOZ: How are you?

MS. CORDOVA: I’m great. I don’t know – how are you feeling?

MS. MUÑOZ: I’m fine. Are you getting hungry? Are you there?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, what I could do is maybe – I could ask you, I could ask you actually a million

more questions or I could ask you one sort of large questions to wrap things up. And do you want to try to go with my large question?

MS. MUÑOZ: What is it?

MS. CORDOVA: I'm very interested in how important – and it's just spinning a little off of what you've just been saying – the importance of architecture for you, that I constantly see you sort of citing architects like Louis Kahn, [Frank Lloyd] Wright. And your work seems to progressively becoming more architectural, that I see the project that you did with Daniel Martinez in Cornell with the Morse code issuing from the building, sort of in line with that. And then you're sort of – I guess there was that project in San Antonio, that I think is sort of – you were sort of assisting on the overall project and created the idea for nichos within the building or the exterior of the building. And perhaps even the project that got rejected by the Dallas Fort Worth Airport, the flowers that would have been these huge, giant flowers coming down from the ceiling.

MS. MUÑOZ: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MS. CORDOVA: And so can you talk maybe a little bit about the importance of architecture within your work, or what degree of influence, or where you see this particular idea of scale directing you in the future?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was just a natural evolution again. I taught architecture when I was working at UTA. I've always been interested in structures. Quoting Winston Churchill, you know, "We shape our houses and our houses shape us." The engagement in installation lead to public art. And certainly in public art, that's what you do. And the projects that interest me are those that become part of the building design. It's conceptualized in design work that maybe localizes the project and address the place, going back to the importance of place.

The San Antonio convention center, being part of a design team to what the building is supposed to look like, and why. That had in its policy trying to fashion, initiate a style of architecture that would be a "mestizaje," a mixture of the ethnic population of San Antonio, so let's make the building look like you are acknowledging that. The emphasis initially was to think of the building in terms of hinges connecting what existed to the new. What were the transitional structures going to be? Was the drama going to be there? Taking location and assessing that the building was going to be seen at large from the east side because the freeway goes by there. So it's the location and alignment there in the city of San Antonio in that spot that informs, plus this "mestizaje" notion. The old section is in the 70s style. I thought that it would be a golden opportunity to build an ascending climax to the east where the freeway faces a kind of disenfranchised section of San Antonio. The east that was blocked off originally, so let's put the drama, part of the drama there and welcome that part of the city.

And then the reason I think the endorsement happened was because they asked, well, what would you do with the building if you became part of the design team? I had thought about this before going into proposal presentation and it was taking the notion of a fiesta, which is what San Antonio's known for, and going not only visually, but I go audial. And tap into the music that informs the fiesta. That's what it's about, it's eating and listening to music, okay – [laughter]. "I would like to see a part of this building become an accordion as a tribute to Tejano music, which is prevalent." And so there is a hinge, where the river got extended, built like an accordion. And the drama is to the east side - that's where the metal and glass and stone merge really nicely. And then there are a series of "nichos" at the base of that section of the building that became places allocated for public art, to invite other artists of the city to become part of that building, too, to generate more public art

projects.

Then, again in San Antonio, the San Fernando Portal, that park has the project “El Rio Habla,” which is a park that goes from street level down to river level in front of the San Fernando Cathedral, placed in that east-west corridor, which is called The Historic Civic Center River Link Project – big, big title and it’s small park [laughter]. And for that one, I was part of the design team again. Six landings, each contains a water element, and a chapter of the development of the history of the river is articulated. I write in the river’s voice from prehistory, to Native American, to colonial that fronts the cathedral, to the flour mills, when the river was put to work, and then WPA, when the river put people to work, and the last station is the future and that’s where the river leaves the responsibility back with people, saying, “I have served you for such a long time. How will you care for me now that I am viejo y seco [old and dry]?”

It is at once a park and an excavation. It’s like a quarry – taking the materials [of the hill country] that Lake/Flato [architects] loves to work with, which is limestone. I bring “fossils,” period objects that pertain to each chapter that are embedded in the pavement. A great landscape architect, Rosa Finsley, has made a beautiful, softened, seasonal palatte, with all the plantings. The project is about that space but it’s also about what goes on outside and surrounds it, so I suggested benches to be placed on the outside that face street life, face the church. So you can sit and watch what happens, what comes in and out of the church, weddings, funerals, you know, it’s that commingling. Lake/Flato then, as a result, got the commission to redo the little plaza, that’s in front of the cathedral and our project received a Mayor’s award.

At the same time, what else am I developing? A DART station that’s also carved limestone in central Garland, and the Latino Cultural Center, a project in Dallas that’s just been finished. The Latino Cultural Center – there I produced large photomurals, part of the design team, and artist. The architect’s embraced the images – I present three images, three concepts, and create an environment. The walls were redesigned to expand the image and it becomes a large cylinder, circular wall, a 66-foot wall photomural and one on the ceiling too. It’s like a rotunda type of environment. There are computer lights that change...designed the floor. There’s a design of a large compass and that extends into the plaza. It’s a whole environment.

For the airport, I apply and I proposed – for an entry location – for the expansion of DFW [Dallas Fort Worth Airport], Terminal D. And the nature of public art is evident in that process. When you go into public art you know that it is overtly political, in many instances. And you know, you have to read your contract very well. It’s contractual language you’re dealing with now. And I spoke about that in *Rompiendo la Liga* when, “you have to learn some yoga and then have to speak in tongues.” You have to know your vocabulary with each discipline. So it’s a very different contract. You don’t deal with the city; you deal directly with the architects. It’s new – the process is new to them. There had never been public art at DFW. So I go in with the idea of doing cascading wildflowers, Texas wildflowers –

MS. CORDOVA: Let me, let me pause you one second because I’m going to stop this tape and just start a new one so hold on.

MS. MUÑOZ: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right we’re recording. It’s Cary Cordova interviewing Celia Muñoz for the Archives for American Art, Smithsonian Institution. It’s still our second session and our third [sic] disc,

and you were just saying about the Dallas Fort Worth Airport. [Note: This is actually the fourth disc.]

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, the airport project. The idea was to make a series, maybe 10, 12 wildflowers, an arrangement of large, sculptural, multicolored wildflowers. And the architects encouraged a Blue Bonnet and trying to accommodate, I said sure it can be, you know, a series of Blue Bonnets.

MS. CORDOVA: That's the state flower.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah. So I comply and then the project's rejected because they found similarity to a non-existing project that I had never seen in an airport that doesn't exist anymore of thousands of small, silk, hanging Blue Bonnets. That used to be in the old Austin airport.

So I'm jolted of course and I write a letter to the DFW chief and want the proposal reevaluated. And the makeup of the public art committees is very important and there should be enough experience going into the makeup. The leader, the intermediary figures that have the responsibility of mediating between the contracted and the contractor, are there to support, in most cases, the artist. Well the representatives are from the architects, so there is a tension there, political tension. And instead of getting the support, I don't. So the media gets a hold of this, it goes into the newspapers, and I just tell the story the way it was. You know, I went with this idea. I was encouraged to go one way and I complied, and then I was – my hands were spanked for doing that.

But I took a very pragmatic attitude, and diplomatic too. I don't like dwelling on the negative. And there's enough public art projects out there. So, you know, like in movie-making – if it doesn't work, you take two. You go to the next one. You know, and that's it. I was very busy finishing The Latino Cultural Center project. I didn't go down without a word – [laughter] – you know, I fought some. But, it's highly political. And there's as many stories about rejections as many artists. When that happened I had lots of friends who came up and said, "Oh you should have heard the one that happened to me" about this – [laughter]. But, but that's public art.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm surprised they didn't give you a chance to at least alter your proposal in some way.

MS. MUÑOZ: No, no it's very political. And, you know, that's – in the past, that happened and that's the nature of the beast at times. Rather, what took place in between is that the project in San Antonio, the portraits of the artists of San Antonio led to the latest project that's opening at the Smithsonian Institution. And that's "Our Journeys, Our Stories: Portraits of Latino Achievement" and I was very flattered and grateful to be selected as one of the three photographers to shoot from a list, compiled by the Smithsonian that will open 17th of this month [February 17, 2004], at the Museum of American History, which is like a really nice circle of activity, how it kind of comes around. And this documentary nature, I'm right now in the middle of another project. Rosalinda Gonzalez and the Station Museum will be co-curating, okay.

I will be expanding on the maquila project. It's time to continue – that issue has not been resolved, and I don't know when and where it will be resolved. Some of the latest reportage on the attitude towards, you know, that situation is happening globally with a big market of enslavement. There's still children being bought and sold left and right, whose lives are destroyed. So I'm watchful – still keeping my eye on that dynamic.

MS. CORDOVA: So that looks like a future direction.

MS. MUÑOZ: It's a heavy one, *Fibra y Furia* is the first time I step [overtly] into the dark side, but humanity has that dark side. I don't know if I would like to stay there. It is challenging. You know, Lourdes Portillo, who made a film on the maquila killings [Señoritas Estraviadas] has received threats on her life, so there is that element of danger too, and how much your activity – where it leads you, where it takes you, so there's that guardedness too.

But I am just real happy, on the positive side, that the Smithsonian project is opening.

MS. CORDOVA: Me too. [Laughter.]

MS. MUÑOZ: Acknowledgement. Yeah, that was super because they traveled us all over and a very fast process, and you had to take six rolls of film per subject, no less, and come up with a series of shots that might give clues of the achievement of these personalities.

MS. CORDOVA: Which are you most pleased with?

MS. MUÑOZ: I don't know; I haven't seen them that large. I don't know what they ultimately selected, but Sandra Cisneros' portrait was ideal in that it's proximate, it's here in Texas and I could take my whole set of lights, the big one. For the other ones I had the small, the [balance?] that are not that heavy because you have to lug this equipment with you. Gosh, "La Familia Garza," a large family and how to position myself to include all of them.

Dolores Huerta was a trooper. We took shots in different settings and she even cooperated in going into the wet field and situate herself in front of the vineyard, and then she got stuck in the mud. We wound up the evening at a politician fundraiser dancing up a storm.

Victor Villaseñor, what a treat to meet him too, very hospitable. I didn't know Cristina Garcia – Cuban writer, lovely, living in an old colonial home overlooking the beach, Santa Monica. The fervor in Linda Alvarado. Alvarado Construction builds the big projects – Denver Airport – the expansion of the Denver Convention Center. Yeah, she was great. She changed her clothing and it was up in her penthouse in Denver.

The governor was very interesting, the governor of New Mexico. Yeah, from an hour, very consolidated interview-combination-photo-session, an hour then down to 45 minutes then down to half an hour, but ultimately we had the hour because there was a cancellation of one of his functions, and that was fun because we went to a party in the end at the governor's mansion, and Eddie Olmos was in town for "The Americanos" project. The last one I shot was actress Chita Rivera in New York City, she was very gracious. The same date that "Only Skin Deep" opened, which included my work – Coco Fusco co-curated that's right now at the ICP [International Center for Photography], and that was in December.

All of them were challenging and just really exciting. Fun project and on Fast Track.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you surprised to be selected to do portraiture?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, yes and no because I had done the Roswell project, which were portraits, and then the San Antonio artists were portraits. But I was really flattered, yeah. So whomever selected me saw the project in San Antonio, and that was Henry Estrada [Project Director, Smithsonian Institution Center for Latino Initiatives, Washington, D.C.]. Yeah. Let's see where that one goes, you know, what that leads to. So we'll see the 35-millimeter size enlarged to – 34 inches that's a leap.

Let's see how they turn out.

The San Antonio project was a low-tech – a Holga camera, plastic rinky-dink camera, and digitized photographs. It was low-tech and high-tech combined. So they're all experiments. The Roswell project, it was not me behind the camera. I didn't come equipped. I didn't know they were going to be portraits, so what I did was grab a photographer from Roswell and I told him what light, how I wanted it, when to release the shutter, it was practically being behind the camera but just letting somebody else do it.

There's still a lot of learning to be done. Portraiture, wow. [Laughs.] And then the whole dialogue about what is a portrait and how the camera in history – falls into historical documentation. There's another whole envelope to be opened.

So maybe you have enough material –

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. I imagine we do. So maybe I'll just wrap up with one sort of last question, being the moment where you've just been given a retrospective and we've just sort of stated your life here on tape. Is there anything critical that you feel got left out of the discussion? Is there anything that you feel that you'd like to add that I haven't asked you or that hasn't been included in various material?

MS. MUÑOZ: What has been written – what has been omitted, I think, from the documentation usually is the theory, the exploration of theories that I think were endorsed here and how they fit in. The work is not only, like I've said, about the identity issues but a lot more complex – and I hope that it will be evident from this interview, and I think it will be, from your reaction.

The show that just closed, the retrospective, is not really a retrospective. It's a survey show. I think a retrospective – I'm kind of funny about that. And then it's – it's only the work that is photography and only a slice, you know, photography and word. It was initiated – co-curated with – oh, something has to be – most emphatically has to be said: credit where credit is due. I was simultaneously approached by Benito Huerta, a long-time friend, who wanted to do an exhibition of the photo-text works. So he wanted to engage MidAmerica, to be a MidAmerica project, but it didn't happen but we went ahead, fervently, and faithfully.

We applied for funding and got it, so it was individually approached that way. It was co-sponsored by a learning institution, UTA, so you really don't have a retrospective in that setting, okay? And we produced a catalog. Yes, it played in some museums, it ended at The El Paso Museum of Art but it might have been a retrospective had the El Paso Museum initiated. At the same time when Benito asked me, Carla Stellweg then director of Blue Star – invited me – and she was the one who had termed it a retrospective. And I said, "Well, Carla, I really am complimented but you don't have a retrospective at Blue Star. It's an alternative space or experimental space but it's kind of funky that way." So I kind of like that notion, too and ultimately it was a more expanded show only there.

But what I consented to – I said, if I can produce a San Antonio project, then I will be very happy. It won't be just a presentation of these existing works but I'll be working on new material. And she said, tell me about it, and so I said, okay. I love San Antonio. I know there's so many Latino artists. There's a community. There's different facets to that community. It's full of tension – all these groups, you know, but it's good energy, it's stimulating energy, it's dialogue, it's active and it's vital, so let me document these artists. And what will you name them? And I reached back in language and it's "Semejante Personajes" – "Significant Personages."

At the same time, it's tongue in cheek, because do we take ourselves that seriously? Life is humbling. [Laughs.] And you can never get cocky, okay, because that's when you fall flat on your face. But I mean, in all reverence to document that community; I did it with much, much love for a city that I love, San Antonio. A lot of people were left out but I had to put limits. They had to fit a certain criteria and then there was a limit to the budgetary – very realistically. They're fun portraits overt filmstrips, and part of them right now are in an exhibit "Picarte: Photography Beyond Representation" the Heard Museum [Phoenix, Arizona].

So, yes, I wanted to give Carla credit. I wanted to give Benito – for his friendship everybody – Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, highly instrumental in embracing the work. Bonnie Clearwater, Ron Gleason, whomever endorsed me early on – my alma mater, UTEP. I had an early first solo show there too with the book works. Becky Duval Reese Director at El Paso Museum of Art, and everybody, all the institutions that have bought the work. My dear friend Tony Zwicker, who has passed away, a New York book art dealer who placed me in very good collections too. You know, I haven't really been a gallery artist, more an activist.

I'm dry-mouthed.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, so –

MS. MUÑOZ: Okay, yeah, to everybody – I don't want to leave anybody out.

MS. CORDOVA: And those you left out know that you care for them. [Laughs.]

MS. MUÑOZ: Thank you, it has been really good. Your questions have been very nicely targeted and let's see what evolves. Thank you.

MS. CORDOVA: Thank you so much, Celia. It's been really wonderful for me. I've enjoyed it immensely. And with that I will stop the tape.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: We are back and we have just one last amendment to the tape. Celia, go ahead.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right. First and foremost, of course my family, who has stood by me and become part of the production, put up with my absence and my messes – [laughs] – Andy who has been just extremely supportive: my daughter Anna, who is now a photographer, an artist herself and made me a grandmother; and my son, Andy, who carries that wicked sense of humor, and lives up in the mountains in Denver – snowboarding and teaching snowboarding, alongside, doing snow and ice sculpture.

Thank you very much.

MS. CORDOVA: All right, so we just needed to address the family and their importance in your life.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right, and they're very important.

MS. CORDOVA: Clearly.

MS. MUÑOZ: Made me swim against the current, you know? [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Not your usual fish.

MS. MUÑOZ: Thank you very much.

MS. CORDOVA: Stopping the tape.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. I am interviewing Celia Muñoz on February 28th, 2004 at her home in Arlington, Texas. This is our third session, and disk one, and we just have an additional addendum to add onto our initial interview sessions.

And, Celia, I think maybe you even have – we were going to start by discussing – going back to that time period when you were living out of Texas and you were sort of traveling around the country, and that important time for you that you really wanted to come back to in our discussion.

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, what was mentioned was that I was looking being in these locations facilitated access to some terrific museums.

And so, I remember packing either one of the children or both of them – the buggy, in the station wagon and heading into downtown and visiting the museums. And that was maybe the times right before the blockbuster shows, you know? Blockbuster shows became prevalent around the '70s, with King Tut, but going back – there was the big Monet exhibitions, and having the opportunity to sit and contemplate in those spaces, these works that had only been in reduced size or projected in slides, but to be able to experience that was certainly very important, and I took every opportunity. You can't substitute that experience, being face to face with a grand, large work.

MS. CORDOVA: Were there any particular museums or artists that you were especially hungry for at that moment?

MS. MUÑOZ: I just liked to see everything that was available, you know? [Laughs.] It was a continuation of what I had seen and studied. Film of course was important during that time, but more so – and more in depth when in the graduate program and from my friendship with artist and fellow colleague John Hernandez [who had studied film].

When I returned to Texas and launched myself into the graduate program, one very important mentor – was the late Guadalupe Posada, the leading Mexican graphic artist who depicted the trends of the Revolution – died in 1913. There was an exhibition when I was in graduate school at – it came to the Amon Carter [Museum, Fort Worth, Texas], a very important show with a huge catalogue "Mexico's Posada" [1979], complete with the prints, pages that were the Mexican Penny Press [or Pictorial Penny journalism]. His plates were on display too.

So it gave a complete picture. His process was clearly articulated in the catalogue and the adroitness, the swiftness with which he developed that body of work. I remember reading that the presses would bring the story to him by courier, and he would read the news, and then, right then and there, crank out the image, drop the plate into the acid bath – into a bucket while the courier waited for that image to run back with to the press.

So it's more of this journalistic advertising connection. It's that high-pressure process too that appealed to me, at how adroit this man was. What fascinated me, too, was reading the text. [The text is in the satiric journalism of the narrative graphic tradition of the mid and late 1800s and early 1900s.] Of course, his imagery, how he developed that Calavera theme to appeal to the masses, the text was just amazingly witty, humorous. And close to the style my grandmother wrote verse.

There were several images that depict train derailments, and one of them was in *Aguas Calientes* – I was almost certain [was the one] that my grandmother and grandfather were in. Did I mention this last time?

MS. CORDOVA: You didn't mention it in our interview. I know I've heard it once before – but I'd love for you to detail it once here.

MS. MUÑOZ: Okay. Once they migrated here, right after the turn of the century – because the oldest son must have been like one year old, and he was born the year before [18]99. He was a baby when they landed here in North America. Like we hear of so many in the story of migration that go back and revisit, that was not the way for my grandmother. She went back once with my grandfather, and that sealed it for her. She would never go back because they were in that derailment in 1901.

And she was pregnant at the time with Antonio, the second child [born in 1901], and was buried –

MS. CORDOVA: The second child was buried?

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, she was – her body – they were both – my grandfather's ear – I don't know if it was the left or the right, but it was severed during that horrific accident. My grandmother was buried under debris. And so when the baby was born I was told he was born with broken ribs. Antonio lived to his 20s. He was kind of a sickly child throughout. But that was a big sign for her not to attempt to go back. She never did. I think my grandfather did but she did not.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you know what caused the train derailment? Was that part of the story at all?

MS. MUÑOZ: I don't know. That place could be revisited, okay. It was in Aguascalientes.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MS. MUÑOZ: Right. So that depiction was my key. When I saw the exhibition I said, it's combining image with word. That's what my work has to be about. And more often than not – you know it is. A lot of us speak about the future or about the now, and a lot of us recount what happened yesterday, a minute ago, or last week, or many years before, and in telling you are now writing a story, an incident, becomes a story. So in that anecdotal nature, I started listening very carefully to those stories that I'd been told – that I would tell, that necessitated being told, or that could be retold from a different point of view, accounting what your interpretation could be, utilizing that experience I thought would be just the right tools.

But it was that exhibition at the Amon Carter that really – I say was my key.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was really a moment where you could see the merging between word and image, why it is so critical to do that.'

MS. MUÑOZ: Oh, definitely. Before that I had been doing some drawings in graduate school where I would write in script, okay? I would use the title for the concept and write it in and it would be part of the image. I remember in trying to find my voice, while – or before stepping into the graduate program – I don't know if last time I touched upon the fact that coming here to suburbia, raising children, having that commonality with neighbors – we were all more or less the same age, okay, and then most of the women stayed home, didn't work, were raising the children, they'd get together for coffee klatches, I'm not a coffee klatch person but for me it was a moment to get to know a close neighbor and to see who your children were playing with. But at the same time it was

a good opportunity to observe the group dynamics. And here we go to the way we were – the observer – yes, that you were part but not really of the group; you know, that you could stand aside. So the group dynamics became the material for drawings for graduate work.

MS. CORDOVA: For the “Enlightenment” series.

MS. MUÑOZ: No. No – before. They were drawings, and bent culturally. Yes, they were about coffee klatches, but the message – the conceptual message was disguised in the Spanish language.

I had an image of a place setting, part of a table cloth, part of a dish, and then the meal. This presentation, this importance of presenting – of this communal thing that happens between people over dinner or coffee, and I remember one was a plate and it had – of course, for me it would have an intentional overt image. It was a taco, all right? Spilling out of that taco, was lettuce but in the form of many women’s legs. And written was “Echatelá al plato,” put her on the plate. It’s a form of dissecting and ingesting. I mean, what happens – there’s scrutiny taking place when you enter with people – [laughs] – and not knowing each other –

So conveniently I picked the group dynamics and translated them into drawings. There was a series that was more feministic that used bullfighter imagery with women’s body parts. The first one was a frontal image, and this was right before the bullfight pieces. This was like a children’s game, kind of totemic, ritualistic image, digesting everything that I was encountering in art history too.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. This whole intersection and a weaving starts to appear. Now, moving forward in time – when I started using the bullfighter imagery it was more the singlized body parts; maybe it was the butt, maybe it was the crotch area. Maybe the butt had banderillas as in the bullfight, then the play with words: “Empicada,” conditioned. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: I don’t believe that I’ve seen these works.

MS. MUÑOZ: No.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you –

MS. MUÑOZ: They’re in the studio.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, have you ever had a chance to show them? Have they been shown or –

MS. MUÑOZ: No, no. I mean, that was graduate work, they were done quickly and they’re very fresh, and I think strong. I remember hearing comments from fellow graduates saying, well, I don’t know whether I can get that personal, but in order for any revolution to happen you’ve got to go the extreme – [inaudible] – put those ideas out and then analyze them and digest them a bit and then see if that is what you’re trying to say.

Then there was commentary about what it was like for kids to grow up in suburbia, what it was like being a soccer mom, you know, wanting your children to be individuals yet putting them in these groups where they’re patterned and programmed to a degree. Those were drawings too, and I used my children in the images, Anna being part of the dance group. This all came before the “Enlightenment” series. By the “Enlightenment” series I knew there was material that I could use, that I could work with, but in order to elevate these concepts, for me they had to be really formalized, and so the packaging, the lettering, had to be text – not written, but printed, still

spinning off from the printmaker – yes, advertising plays a part, but I was a printmaker for many years, and that response to the ink, the impression, on the paper, is still very seductive to this day. I still am in love with prints.

These pages became as close to a print as I could bring it exploring, but letting photography come into the picture. The text was letterpressed on quality paper. So it was this whole mixture using everything that I had been exposed to and just utilizing those areas that I responded to. It's thrilling still for me to see paper with the mark from the press. It's still in my blood. [Laughs.] And so you can see where my connection to Posada, my response to Posada, and in turn his work furthering mine was a natural evolution. *El Limite* has some of this imagery, too. The derailment was depicted in several of the installations as a small wall drawing.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, along with a photograph, right?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was a projection of Guadalupe Posada's image.

MS. CORDOVA: But am I right in thinking there is also an image from the Casasola photograph of the woman peering out of the train? Is that –

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah, but that is photography, see?

MS. CORDOVA: I am just thinking of – you're claiming these other sources too.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, in appropriation, sure, sure, sure, because they all could belong together, rightfully so. And translating, making a photograph into a graphic image, which can easily be done, right, duplicating it with the use of a big camera, the Xerox machine. You know, turning that into a graphic image, and then I would rework the image – change it some and make it more kin to Posada style. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: What would you do to change the image?

MS. MUÑOZ: In duplicating – once you begin to enlarge, the image begins to break down, okay? And that is advertising information. Old lettering that has been small but then once it's duplicated and enlarged, you begin to see those – the roughness of a curve or a line and that's romantic, too, but at the same time, it's telling. It's giving the history of the work as well as the impression, you know, and it's all about impression. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Did you play a lot with Xeroxing?

MS. MUÑOZ: I did a lot. In graduate school. I mean, that is when Xerox and colored Xerox came into play. And the printing on transparencies – there was a lot of overlaying imagery –

MS. CORDOVA: Did that have any lasting influence, do you think?

MS. MUÑOZ: Certainly. Questioning, is made evident by layers, yes. This led to much more experimentation and then photography was right. Once those works became part of the body of work, during graduate school, I was very ready to do that, having had a Brownie camera as a child and, being responsive to the photograph. So, I went through the whole darkroom experience.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you become very experimental with the camera or did you still maintain a, sort of, point and shoot?

MS. MUÑOZ: I approached it more as film. The “Enlightenment” is all sequential. They are developed through this series of images, through this unfolding of a tale. So, they are filmic. It was kind of a Souza attitude but I like being in the darkroom and exploring and pushing and pulling an image and seeing where – letting it just speak and see where it would take me. I love the time – that quiet time, the sound of water, the dark environment. [Laughs.] Just isolated, and we had a very good lab at the university, we were allowed to go in at all hours – work, two or three o’clock in the morning, or so.

So, photography just became a very natural element in the work. I wanted to push that further, I wanted a bigger camera to see just what would happen and after graduate school the 4x5 came into the picture and the image is turned upside down and that altered my perception and being a slower process, the narratives, the stories, were really synthesized instead of a series of images it had to be captured in one or two photographs. You rethink these layers and how they could become evident in one image.

And breaking that – then, I wanted to pull it apart again – to pull those layers and that’s when one installation “Rompiendo la Liga” broke the bindings, I could deconstruct this whole thing and spread those pages across the walls or the space.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you go through any special process in terms of how you would put the images on the walls? Was there – did you develop any technique along those lines or was it – you would walk into a space and start to contemplate the space?

MS. MUÑOZ: Those residencies are short. You develop something in a week. Some of the residencies called for maybe a month. I always asked for a floor plan, and worked from there. But also, left room for flexibility in case once I was there, then, I mean it’s different seeing a floor plan. 8½ x 11 inches or, 11x17 inch page and then being inside the space, right. And the wonder of letting the space speak.

I don’t know if I mentioned last time, like, Snug Harbor, which was supposed to be a louder installation. Everything – the images – I was using black and white. White walls and black – expedient marks. At Snug Harbor, it started to change. I went in with a preconceived idea but stepping into my room – which was a whole gallery space – and receiving a light – altered light. I allowed the natural elements to be the dictating force. Instead of being loud it became quiet – it became a quiet space. Some of the walls [I wanted a] light gray so that I could include white or variations of gray. Some of the images were just white, ghostly, because I wanted that spiritual thing, that is Snug Harbor, because of its history, because it is a historical place – allow that element to come in. I mean, how many little mariners’ ghosts are floating around that area?

A set of windows had a portable wall that blocked part of the light. But spilled, and radiated behind that portable wall. Maybe it was six feet away from the windows. You don’t have that direct light coming in. You have this eminence and this radiance around the portable wall so that became one of the focal areas of that space. That became a light gray wall, and white scrolls were hung there, and the white bare trees were painted above every scroll.

It became a quiet space. I remember hunting for something that had been part of the building and it was a beautiful bench. And I set that in the middle of the room so you could sit and contemplate. The dental cabinet was also part of that installation, the piece of furniture that has multiple drawers, and inside each drawer – is a printed story, part of the “Enlightenments” or new stories. I allowed myself – that flexibility to upgrade it, to change it, so those stories were slipped between Plexiglas and the drawer, you know, sandwiched in.

And it's interactive. You can pull the drawers and read, and in the bottom drawers are the plaster teeth molds that I've collected from different dentists – that hinged on the notion of identity.

MS. CORDOVA: I didn't know that you did this actually. I didn't realize that that was a part of the installation, this whole –

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah, and that was the title piece for the show that Benito [Huerta] curated. "Stories Your Mother Never Told You [a traveling exhibition that was co-sponsored by the Gallery at UTA]."

MS. CORDOVA: That's right. Okay. Yes, of course.

MS. MUÑOZ: That dental cabinet –

MS. CORDOVA: And so, in seeing these unique teeth molds, that was also connecting to individual identities, or –

MS. MUÑOZ: That was before DNA –

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MS. MUÑOZ: [Laughter.] Now I probably would do like an abstraction you know, a stem or a big visual of your DNA.

MS. CORDOVA: That also has a degree of anonymity.

MS. MUÑOZ: Very much so – because it looks like a gorgeous design, and I would probably use Plexiglas, so there's this biology and synthetics fused.

MS. CORDOVA: Was there any particular expiration for this installation at that moment?

MS. MUÑOZ: It was being in Snug Harbor and allowing that history to come in. I collected stories from the retired citizenry that remembered Snug Harbor – that had any memory of Snug Harbor. A majority of them had to go back to their childhood, the concept changes at different venues.

[Audio break]

MS. CORDOVA: So we had a couple of things that we wanted to tackle in this additional session, and we've covered a little bit but I think one thing you mentioned – and maybe you could guide me a little bit – is your interest in talking about loss of innocence, and you had referred to your work and your "Enlightenment" series *Double Bubble and World War II*, and where would you want to take us in that direction?

MS. MUÑOZ: It's like back to the future, really, because that's now, and it's so pronounced right now. Just remembering the news last night of priests abusing the children. Having been an only child for 10 years puts you in a special position, and I keep referring to that stance as an observer, and having had restriction very early on, not being allowed to play outside with the neighborhood children. I was allowed to have certain friends come in and play – they were very protective – then to this experience of having that park as a backyard, you know, this whole flip of a coin completely, made me appreciate that time in my life. I still look to it as some of the happiest moments of my childhood.

And having been an educator and having worked with children, and having raised my children –

you're seeing that point of reference – I think that child's voice is extremely powerful, as Gunter Grass does in *The Tin Drum*. What do we have here in America? We have, what? *Peter Pan*, and then exploit it commercially.

MS. CORDOVA: They're a little more uplifting.

MS. MUÑOZ: – Toys R Us, "I don't want to grow up – [laughs] – I want to be a Toys R Us kid," I mean, who really wants to grow up? And to carry that sense of wonderment and bewilderment and innocence. I mean, why – the early modernists, why the Miró's, the Klee's, the Kandinsky's, you know, Picasso's? In trying to maintain that freshness of observation is something to be cherished and something that I think all of us humans lament losing, and if we can retain some of that, still capture newness in what we already know.

The "Enlightenment" series has that voice. One – really favorite piece, is #2, because it's so loaded. #2 globalizes it, *Double Bubble and WW II*. I used a little propaganda book that dad brought back from World War II. It's like a two-inch book for tiny hands. Hundreds of thousands were delivered or spread. The photographs in that little book have Hitler's young boy army all lined up shaking hands with the furor, he did it outside his culture but he did it within his culture – mercilessly – doing away with their innocence, which is for me an unforgivable – sin.

This is carried into *Fibra* and *Furia*, also because it's young women. A lot of 'em in their teens, early, late twenties – again, arresting development or destroying it forever.

Humanity has its darkness and some of us want to dissect that. Some like to deny that aspect of humanity, but it is very much in the fabric. That is a challenge for us that hinges on the tragic human condition of our being, and it will be subject matter – I think with me it will. I am very distressed by the sacrifice we pay as we "progress" – because each new tool takes us beyond yet, regresses us to our most primitiveness and the more bestial of our existence to this proliferation – pornography – within the Internet is serious, it's very serious, and what will the manifestation be later on? We're already seeing it.

I am glad that the media has forced probing – yes, we scrutinize media, but at the same time it brings these issues up to the forefront, and they need to be addressed and we need to talk about that.

[Phone rings.]

MS. CORDOVA: Should I pause it?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we're back recording. We just took a quick break, and in taking that break we sort of thought we would angle towards maybe a closing direction for us in that now having given a little bit more ground to all this work and these various sources, we see how your work grows into more and more developing public art and what – I had the opportunity to finally view your public art project at the Latino Cultural Center that just opened here in Dallas, and it's really a – it's an impressive work of art to walk in there and see that. It flashes in different colors. It has many different images, many different layers. I thought of the Xerox even in relation to that particular work and your sort of duplication and playing – constantly changing images. And I thought maybe you could just elaborate on how that project evolved, how you had to work with the community to

even create that particular image, and what the various inspirations were within the image itself.

MS. MUÑOZ: The Latino Cultural Center is the latest public art project I have completed so far, and certainly all the public art hinges on the installation work, because that's when I was first invited to apply while I was doing the installation work tackling – the spaces, architecturally. Yet, that project is like a culmination. It's not a piece of work that was fabricated to be placed as – as most of us refer as to plop art, where you have a space and bring something and place it there, as with a lot of sculpture fabricated in a studio and then moved and located in a spot.

I opted to do more of an environment. I wanted the piece to become part of the building and it did develop that way. The Legorretas – the main architects – responded to the idea very well and the space was redesigned to elaborate, to accommodate, and to push the concept farther. I originally presented the idea of having three images for three walls. My approach was in trying to make evident the complexity and the richness of the Latino culture.

So for me that called for a mirage – a collage of all these influences. I mean, how do you define influence really? It's a complex thing. So I have to build complexity into images that could still be simplified. So I chose three themes: "Permanence." Our culture has been around for a long time, so I went to the most basic of reverence and practice within the Latino cultures, and not only ours but you spill out – and give it a more universal base, and that is the veneration of the elements and the questioning of place. So many cultures from the beginning have wondered about the celestial and our change of time, and have venerated that marvelous planet, the sun, which is life.

I chose "Permanence" to be a starting point, and fused many different influences and many different suns and then a manmade one too. A folk art image floats on the very top. That's a face with other small faces surrounding it. But in –

MS. CORDOVA: That's man-made?

MS. MUÑOZ: Yeah, that's a picture of a ceramic from Ocomichu – that I photographed. I used it in another photograph called *EI*, also.

MS. CORDOVA: *EI*?

MS. MUÑOZ: *Ella y EI*, uh-huh. In that piece it's in the background. For this piece it's in the foreground, as the focal point because it's in the center as the face of the sun.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MS. MUÑOZ: The rays emanating from that face are partly Baroque, yet complementing other different sources. It's just hundreds of images. The Aztec sun is also referenced. It's this fusion of cultures. I lean it more towards the Latino culture, and the colonization – you've got to make a statement about that. That's "Permanence" and it's basically yellow. The other is dedicated to the wonderment of creativity, what art is about, what inspiration is about, and that is the blue section that's "Poetry." And the last one is "Passion," and that's in red. So there's the basic color palette that make the rest of the spectrum: the yellow, the blue, and the red.

MS. CORDOVA: Primary.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes, primary. The blue, which is inspiration, came from an Agustín Lara song. Called "Mujer" – that speaks to "la maravilla de la inspiracion." What is creativity? It's a miracle, a marvel. It is a clash of elements. It's fireworks, it's lightning, it's water, it's sky, and it's transformation, it's

butterflies. Of course that's also the story of migration.

The fact that this is a cultural center, it will address performance. The sequins allude to dance, to movement. Then the red was the last one, and it was the least resolved because I was against time. So what I did is assemble a bunch of imagery that dealt with passion, that alluded to fire. You've got the elements like fire, earth, wind. And a heart also – there are some architectural details, and a blast – an explosion, behind the heart. This is a more advanced image – the original, like just a collage of stuff, and I presented it as such. As exemplary of what might take place – it will all change through the process – they always do – but those are the basic themes.

When the Mexican architects saw the images, they said, why don't we build a circular wall and let it be a seamless image, and you can use the ceiling too. So the sun went to the ceiling and the red and the blue images were reworked many, many times, and reconfigured to fit the space. At the same time, my proposal included addressing the whole space, as orientation. This is the Latino Cultural Center. This is where people will come to revisit their culture and to project it – a cultural center is about place, again. It's about belonging.

MS. CORDOVA: And let me pause you just for a moment because I'm going to end this tape and put in another one, so hold on and then we'll get right back to that point.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we're back recording. This is Cary Cordova with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Celia Muñoz. This is session three, disk two.

And we were just talking about the Latino Cultural Center as place and I interrupted you. Can you tell me about that?

MS. MUÑOZ: Sure. It is about finding your place within your city, and there was so much debate early on as to where the building was going to be placed, whether it should be in the heart of the city in the cultural district, or in Oak Cliff, where there's a concentration of the Hispanic population, which is logical too. I remember putting my two-cents' worth my input was that it become part of the cultural district so when people would come to visit that area we would be nearby, and it could be visited too, instead of isolating it.

So place becomes important. I always want to know where I am. I'm pretty well spatially oriented. I like to know where north and south is, and so that was my starting point: where is this place? And in order to locate it in space I thought the most logical thing to do would be to use the image of a compass so you could know where and how it is aligned, and it is not true north and south; the building angles. The floor has the center of the compass. The floor is stained in a simplified compass design but the needle or the arrow pointing north is the widest line on the floor, and that design is carried out into the plaza.

Originally – you know, sometimes in public art you are allowed to dream grandly, and at one point it was said that maybe the whole compass would radiate throughout the building, so I designed it as having that space be the center, the heart of the cultural center.

Well, as most – as construction goes and budgetary issues evolve, sometimes there is more money, sometimes there is less, and so it became less, and we had to say more with less. We all opted for just a section. But that completes an environment, so it's not just the walls but it's that whole space and its connection to the rest and to the city; to the universe.

The plaza pavement design is composed of pavers – brick pavers, of special made colors and some of the regular blends.

MS. CORDOVA: It's really a phenomenal work. It's interesting to hear how it was you and the architects coming together to decide that it should be – I mean, the way that the images work is they appear one after the other after the other in a sort of continuing cycle. I think earlier you were explaining that you'd even changed the timing to some degree to sort of accommodate how people enter the room.

MS. MUÑOZ: Well, this is the largest photo image that I have done. It's a circular wall. It's 66 feet in circumference, the image starts about 12 feet above – from floor level and it goes up 13 feet to the ceiling. So it's a dynamic piece yet – there's not much light that emanates into that room. And there exists another element to the project that consists of lights, of computerized lights that change in color. And I chose to employ and implement the lights because taking the technology used to create that image, they're computerized images, and when you create a collage it is these layers of images that often comprise a picture.

So to make these layers evident I went back to the darkroom mentality process and the photography process. Color photography is a combination of the magenta, a cyan, and yellow. The computerized lights change; they go the full spectrum, and these different layers are made evident as they change. It's a cycle. It's a 15-second cycle. I timed the passage from one door, as you enter and as you exit into the lobby, and it is 15 seconds if you don't stop, so that is the cycle that factors into the timing of the lights.

I wanted to have that space – be a contemplative, meditative spot in the building. And so the sequence and the way the lights change has to be in a very smooth transition. There cannot be vibration or any alteration of mood. There are four programs – in each one the timing is slowed but not to the degree that if you enter that space you would not see a change. There always has to be change, because the image is above and somebody passing through might not look up, so there has to be some change to alter your vision and to arrest the viewer, the visitor.

MS. CORDOVA: Do the four different programs have a different story to each of them, do you feel, or –

MS. MUÑOZ: No, it's just that prolongation of time. The blues will stay with you a little bit longer. That soothing mood is sustained. Yeah, this is indeed one of the more dramatic public art projects that I have done. There's several that are very dear to me. The San Antonio River Walk Project is one that I truly love. The outdoor park. Words are literally carved into the limestone.

MS. CORDOVA: Does the Dallas center not have words? Was that just a natural progression of the project or did you have words originally and they got left out?

MS. MUÑOZ: Words did not want to be in the photo murals, [there is only one word “Soltitorium” used in the Plaza pavement. Made of metal letters.] It's one of the few images that doesn't have words, but, you know, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, as they say. [Laughter.] Instead of being so directive, I wanted to make it much more allegorical and magical. Every piece has its own voice and some say, I want to use words, or, I want to be a painting, or, I want to be a photograph. And I just listen very carefully to see what it is that each one wants to be.

Well in the San Antonio Convention Center, the expansion project, the contribution was just conceptual for the carpet. Their graphic artists were the ones that developed it – and there was I

think maybe one little guy [artist, Luis Trevino] that developed the majority of the imagery. The carpet is treated more like rugs. Different themes according to the function of the rooms, like the small ballroom has a folkloric dancer, okay? The main lobby in the large ballroom lobby entrance has a cityscape of all the signifiers, the buildings that signify San Antonio.

There is a combination of – well, this alludes to words – it's a fusion of like Islamic characters. It's a fusion of that with like branding iron designs and graffiti, and that's one of the borders too. We took details of an image from one of the missions, which is a little face of a sun and that became another border also. The Tree of Life became the overall unifying theme, and it's more like veins than a real tree – or branches. La Ventana Rosa became an image too. And these were developed, you know, by hand and computer too.

When you do public art there is an opportunity to produce yourself, or to fabricate, hire out, and a lot of times these pieces are large enough to where we have to rely on people that have more expertise. So for some, like the Latino Cultural Center, I am not a computer person. I know what I want and I can see it in my mind's eye, so I have the assistance of my daughter, who was schooled in that, in photo video and computer, and so she is hired for some of these – uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: I thought I saw her handiwork.

MS. MUÑOZ: Yes. Yes, yes, uh-huh. I welcome whatever assistance – I mean, I just follow, and listen very carefully to what it wants to be, what it wants to become. To quote Louis I. Kahn, "It just waits for that which presents itself." I have approached installation work and public artwork and a majority of the works too that way because you have to allow your materials, your concepts to have a life.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, I think that's maybe a great note to end on because I think we've covered so much, and that really integrates a special theme in your work of sort of looking both on the inside and the exterior, sort of seeing the forces coming together.

All right, I'll end the tape here, thank you.

MS. MUÑOZ: Great. Thank you. It was a pleasure.

[End of Interview.]

Last updated...February 16, 2007