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Oral history interview with Franco Mondini-
Ruiz, 2004 July 7-8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Franco Mondini-Ruiz on July 7-8, 2004. The interview took place in Alameda and San Antonio, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas.

This transcript has been lightly edited. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MS. CARY CORDOVA: All right. We are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Franco Mondini-Ruiz on July 7, 2004. This is Session One and Disc One. And I've got a really easy question for you. When and where were you born?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was born on June 2, 1961, in San Antonio, Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And now, your family – your father was born in Italy, is that true?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. My father was born in Bracciano, B-r-a-c-c-i-a-n-o, Bracciano Italy, a small town north of Rome on a beautiful lake called Lago Bracciano, and that's where he's from.

MS. CORDOVA: When did he come to the United States?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: My father was born, actually, in an upper middle class family. My grandfather was actually mayor of the town, his name was Giuseppe Mondini, G-i-u-s-e-p-p-e. My grandfather was quite, I think, a disciplinarian, and my father did not enjoy living under my grandfather's rule. And my grandfather, being a mayor, had a lot of bourgeois aspirations for my father, he probably wanted him to be a lawyer or a doctor.

And my dad joined the Italian Air Force, and he went to the Air Force Academy, which was very prestigious in those days. This is in the late 1950s. My dad was stationed in San Antonio, Texas for English training and missile guidance training. He was part of NATO and he was with the mission that was pretty high – pretty secretive. Apparently it was during that period where he met my mother, who was born in San Antonio.

Her name is Stella Ruiz. S-t-e-l-l-a R-u-i-z. She always felt bad that she was never even given a middle name, which is kind of rare in Latino culture, and she never liked the name Stella, although it is an Italian name meaning star. She always stylized it and called herself Estelle or Estella. Apparently my father had a childhood sweetheart at the time, back in Italy – and at the end of the tape we'll probably return to this part of the story – but today my dad is living back in Italy and married to that childhood sweetheart that he had left when he got my mother pregnant with me and married her.

So the story goes full circle, and the story deals with a lot of issues of class and culture and people branching out and trying to join a larger world, but sometimes retreating to the small world they came from in the first place. My mother –

MS. CORDOVA: What year did your parents marry?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They would have been married in 1960. My dad is still in the Italian Air Force, he is getting his butt in trouble. He is not supposed to fraternize with the locals and marry them. This is a high security NATO mission. Not that security, but they didn't want a lot of this kind of thing going on.

Apparently my dad and many of his buddies fell in love with the Mexican women. Now, it was a time of Spaghetti Westerns and a time of high romanticization of Texas. So my dad remembers loving San Antonio, he'd go into the mercados and it was full of bubbling cauldrons and Mexican – it was like a movie set. And here was my mother and her friends that were beauties, that were very European, they didn't look very Indian, they were very Spanish-looking women with snow white skin, jet black eyes and jet black hair.

And in many ways, very sophisticated in my father's eyes. Although my father was upper middle class, here were these women dressed in really smart suits and dresses and driving cars. Only very, very rich, eccentric women of my mother's age were driving cars. Her sisters were working in banks and fancy department stores. At that time some of the better-looking, better-educated middle-class, even lower-middle-class Mexican American women could get jobs like that.

But in my dad's eyes it was very prestigious, so he was already confused about class and culture at the time. Of course, he fell in love with her for her beauty and her very eccentric personality. But he also thought, I think, at the time he was kind of marrying into his own class. It turned out though, as he got to know my mom better, here is my mom living in the West Side in this crooked house that my grandfather had built out of material scraps, that was trying its hardest to look like a middle-class white person's house.

It wasn't a Mexican bordello, it was a little casita. It was, you know, a kind of a middle class white house made out of lumber and there were five beautiful sisters living in it. There was not one correct right-angle in the whole house. The house was full of cheap linoleum and cats and dogs and women and bourgeois knick-knacks, not Mexican-style knick-knacks, but the kind of things that Mexican-Americans, at that time, were collecting: little porcelain white figurines of ladies and stuff like that.

My dad still romanticized all of that stuff, still kind of liked it, that they had chickens and my dad, you know, being Italian, was still very pastoral, and had aunts and uncles also that lived in farms and lived in the countryside that had their beautiful daughters and all that.

Turns out, though, my father married my mother and she wasn't a virgin, which was really bad. My mother had already been married before, which was difficult for my mom, and kind of scandalous for my dad to have married a woman that had already had a baby. I grew up with a half brother, my older brother Mark, who looks a lot more Mexican than I do or my siblings. I didn't find out till I was 21-years-old that he was really my half-brother, that my mother had had a previous husband.

MS. CORDOVA: Did she just decide to tell you about that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, I went to - [phone rings] - let's see if we can get our phone turned off.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, let me pause this.

[Pause.]

All right, we're back recording. And you were saying about your brother.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So I don't find out that my brother, who always looked more Indian than I did, who was always treated much like an indentured servant, was [actually] my half-brother. So I'm 21-years-old, I've gone to Italy for the first time and I kept being introduced by my grandfather as the first-born son. Now, my father had an estranged relationship, pretty much, with my grandfather. I'm here in Italy now, and I haven't gone to Italy 'til I was 21, and now I've found out why they always made it so difficult for me to go, they didn't want me to find out that that was my half-brother.

So my grandfather in Italy did not have the decency to recognize my brother, nor did my father have the will strong enough to demand it of his father and his family. So the secret was out, and although this is my brother's story, it takes some interesting angles, because the truth about my family is, and it's become a - not a metaphor - but maybe you had a different experience, hopefully, you did. But I really felt there was issues of race and class prejudice within my own family.

And I really feel, in a microcosm, I grew up in the Conquest. I really grew up with an arrogant, talented, in many ways, on paper, superior father from European lineage, and a mixed-race, inferior mother of mestizo lineage. I grew up in the shadow of the Conquest with him, out in the suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. But it might as well have been 1512 because that is the battles that went on within my family on a daily basis. They weren't always spoken very clearly, but it does exist and it's something that I've become hypersensitive to throughout my life.

Now I'm mellowing and I'm older and I'm not as angry about it, but there were issues that scarred me.

MS. CORDOVA: When do you think you were gaining consciousness of this kind of equilibrium?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I didn't gain consciousness until I would have been in law school. My father, although grew up upper class, he had some good qualities and we were kind of Bohemian. You know, we lived in a trailer, we had kind of a junkie house, and then sometimes - but in many ways we were also - there was high culture and low culture being mixed together, but we also had gorgeous paintings that my father painted, and we had the best food you could eat anywhere, probably, in Texas. My father would make incredible gourmet dishes.

So I grew up with this high culture-low culture mix which I loved. However, I was a product of the 60s, I was gay, I was also a product of the 70s and 80s and Texas was booming. So all of a sudden all of my peer group - I grew up in the suburbs - it was a time of conspicuous consumption. So I really just wanted to be a successful person, that's what I cared about at the time. You know, all my friends were mostly white, I grew up in the white suburbs, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Which suburbs?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Boerne. Boerne is a small German town north of here. So most of my friends were upper-middle-class white kids with tennis courts, and swimming pools, and ranches, and brand new Trans-Am's for their 16th birthdays. And my parents had the Radio Shack stores. We were peddlers. We had the electronic stores, but they were very interesting because my dad was so cultured. He spoke six or seven languages, there were wealthy people moving to Boerne, and they had lived in New York, they had lived in California, they had lived in Paris, and so it became kind of this bizarre community.

And they loved my dad because our TV stores became cultural salons. You know, my dad didn't want to talk about football and hunting, he wanted to talk about culture and recipes and books and history. And so we had this weird television shop, my mother in the back, jealous of my dad talking to all these women, crunching numbers in her messy, shabby office, like *Sanford and Son*. And then I set up the store gorgeously because I used the store as an installation.

So the stores were beautiful, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: How many were there?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: We had three at the peak, but the one in Boerne was the main one. But it was a mom-and-pop store. And my brother was really the bread-winner. He wasn't allowed to play sports, he was belittled, he wasn't allowed to do anything, and he loved working. And he poured all his energies and his sorrows into work.

[Knock on door, pause.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we're back to Boerne.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay, so we're back in Boerne, Texas, this hill-country town.

MS. CORDOVA: And this was your brother Mark?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: This was my older brother, Mark, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And you have a sister?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I have two younger sisters.

MS. CORDOVA: Two younger sisters. And their names are?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: One is Angela and one is Bella.

MS. CORDOVA: Bella?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Bella. So we prospered. We went from lower-middle-class to middle-class to almost on the – putting on airs of upper-middle-class-dom. And so you asked me about my consciousness. So I went to St. Mary's Law School [St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas]. For my mother's generation that would have been a dream come true. That's where the boys of the good families went.

And of course when she was growing up there would be a few Mexican families, and mostly white, Catholic families. By the time I went it was really a school that had heavily recruited middle-class Mexican Americans. Then I –

MS. CORDOVA: That was St. Mary's?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: That was St. Mary's undergrad. I was an English major. I was gay, in the closet. All I believed in was work and in self-improvement. I finished college in three years. I worked at my parents' store. I still hung around with a few of my friends from high school, but I was very, very serious about making something of myself.

I did not party yet, I did not go to lunch, and I did not go to parties: I was not fun. I did not do drugs. I had no idea you were supposed to enjoy your life. I just thought your life was a valley of sorrow. But I knew that maybe if I worked, something would come out of it. So I made very good grades and I got accepted to St. Mary's Law School. I was one of the youngest accepted and it was a brand new world, because it was not like the undergrad.

All of a sudden it was this parking lot full of BMWs and six-foot-tall gorgeous blonde people, you know. And three Latinos and two blacks, in a city that's 80 percent Latino. I might be exaggerating, maybe it was like 10 percent Latino, but very, very underrepresented. This was white, elite, rich Texas kids. So although some of my friends

were upper-middle-class smart kids, this was the first time I'd been exposed to Gringo Texas, ranchers' sons and beautiful blonde girls and all that kind of stuff.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was dramatically different from the suburban life?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, from the suburban life as well as going to undergrad at St. Mary's. Maybe undergrad from St. Mary's had some rich kids, Mexican kids who were the sons of judges in Laredo and all that, but as far as the waspy, rich Texas kids, this was the first time I had ever been in that world.

MS. CORDOVA: A kind of confrontation with class?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Class.

MS. CORDOVA: Like, the wealthier class.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, and you could see it. I mean, the parking lot was full of BMWs and gorgeous clothes and people traveling. And I liked it, and I wanted it, I wanted a piece of it. So I worked hard, some more. And I probably, at that time, still bought into what my father had taught me, that I had work-ethic, and Mexicans were lazy and inferior, and I wasn't quite one of those people. But there were some of us that were that way.

I was conflicted. At the same time when I had gone to undergrad, I was starting to meet these glamorous Mexican kids, which is the first time I had met glamorous Mexican kids. Keep in mind, San Antonio for the most part has two Latino populations. It's changed a lot, but we're still talking about the early 80s. There was this secret society - not secret, but very closed society of the Mexican elite, which I knew nothing about that world.

There were rich Mexican nationals, which I knew nothing about that world, and there was huge, huge lower-middle-class Mexican kids, like myself. I didn't look like one, I looked like a European. I didn't talk like one because I grew up in a white-boy town. Anyway, so I was - I didn't know what world I belonged to yet, but I wanted to succeed and I wanted - it was the '80s.

Okay, so I haven't even had sex yet, I haven't lived yet. And I'm already graduating law school, top of my class. I'm one of the editors of the law review and I'm always worrying about weight issues, and I'd lose weight - and I wanted to be a preppy. I was a preppy wannabe.

Why are you laughing? [Laughing.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughing.] You're just bringing visions and memories of youth.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Exactly.

[Laughter.]

So I'm a preppy wannabe. So I get to intern at two very prestigious law firms in San Antonio. The law firms in San Antonio at that time are still lily white. But I went to two lily-white law firms - no they're not. I went to Cox and Smith, where I end up working, where I felt more comfortable. It was guys and girls that I identified with. We weren't high-born, but we were the brains and we were the top law firm, it was the biggest law firm. And I felt comfortable in that.

The other one was Matthews and Branscomb. Now, that had people from the old, old money families of San Antonio, which are mostly German, German stock. You know, this is a law firm from the 1860s, probably. It was the Germans. Now, they were more progressive and they knew that they had to start actively recruiting people from Harvard and Yale, and stuff like that.

So I was clerking - there was a few of us Latinos from San Antonio that were brainy and had made the good grades and got these jobs. The other Latinos that were coming in were from Harvard and Yale, and probably products of affirmative action. They were - a couple of them were beautiful, but most of them weren't that beautiful, they were like Indian-looking. Their parents were migrant workers. You know, that was another world that I had nothing to do with.

You know, I was a middle-to-lower-middle-class Catholic Mexican-American, light-skinned from San Antonio that grew up in the white suburbs and didn't speak Spanish. And here were these, dark-skinned, migrant-worker parented children that somehow - through affirmative action, through luck, through brains, through desire, all of these things that I would have to filter through later - were in these prestige law schools firms and going on these yachting trips with us, and blah, blah, blah and blah, blah, blah.

And one time, one of the girls said to me they liked - I didn't know who I was yet. I was a baby, I meant well, you know. So I tried to befriend all of them, but I didn't have a whole lot in common, but as they started to - and

they treated me with suspicion, and they were so advanced, having gone to Harvard and Yale with Latino – their consciousness had been raised and mine hadn't been yet.

And one time at a barbecue, they said, "Franco, you're Chicano, aren't you?" And the word Chicano was a bad word in San Antonio. And even the word "Mexican" wasn't said yet. And this is five-minutes-ago, this is mid 80s. So I bristle at the barbecue, and I go, "Well, my mother's Spanish." You know, maybe I even said Mexican, maybe I'd learned enough, my consciousness had been raised just enough to say that, you know?

I said, "My mother's of Mexican descent, you know, but I guess I'm a Chicano," but I never use that word. "Well, then if you're Chicano, then why do you act so white?" And I said, "Well, honey, you're wearing those Oaxacan Mexican dresses, you can't get any whiter than that," you know – you know what I mean? So already, I was aware of the nuances and the ironies of cultural exoticization.

So here were Mexican girls wearing Oaxacan dresses. Their parents would have been horrified. Girls in Oaxaca don't dress like that, unless you're an old Indian lady, you know? And here were these college girls telling me I was so white and that they had raised their consciousness. Little did they know that those Oaxacan dresses were only in vogue because blonde girls, that were sorority girls at UT, decided to bring them into vogue, you know?

So that was this – that explosion summed it all up. My consciousness was being raised, but I also had a – I was also from a place where I could see the big picture, you know what I mean?

MS. CORDOVA: And you were sort of in your early 20s around then?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: By then I would have been – 1985, mid-20s, yeah. So then I realize eventually – okay, so then it's like I – it plants a seed. The seed is planted, but I'm still thinking, oh, any Mexican could make it if they decided to work as hard and be as miserable as me, you know what I mean?

[Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: That's a great phrase to live by.

[Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, you know. Only later did I realize that the privilege of growing up in a white suburb, of learning how to talk like a white boy, the privilege of having a European father that speaks six languages, the privilege of having a light-skinned mother – the privilege of all these things worked in my favor and I wasn't aware of it yet.

I work with Cox and Smith, I am the darling of Cox and Smith because I have these skills that I've learned as a Latino. I'm charming, I'm friendly, I'm open, I'm not snobby, I'm obedient, you know, I'm a good – all these things I have going on, you know, as far as Mexican stereotypes are concerned. And I also have all the qualities of a white boy, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: You're non-threatening?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. I'm a non-threatening Latino. Not only that, I'm a closet Latino, they don't know yet. My name is still Franco Mondini. And through college, I've been an Italophile. Every summer in college I'm going to Italy, and just being crazy about my Italian culture, which already was a little bit rebellious against white culture, you know? But I wasn't yet prepared to get in touch with my Mexican side yet.

I graduate, I finally start going to lunch and drinking and drugging and having sex, and had sex with boys and going to gay bars, and I will never be the same again.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: So post-1985 you have an awakening?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. It's like Helen Keller, you know, when the water – "water" – the pump. I'm like, what was I thinking? So, okay, all the energy I made to making straight A's, I use all this energy now to learn everything I could about my culture, to study it, to explore it. I made a lot of mistakes. But I was voracious. I had sex with everyone and it was wonderful, and I learned other people –

See, when you're gay, also, you get this social entrée. So all of a sudden I was part of the glamorous gay bar in San Antonio was the Bonham. So it was this – you could one night go to bed with some gangster, you could one night go to bed with some poor Mexican guy in the West Side or an illegal alien, I mean a migrant worker from Mexico, or the richest boy in town. You know, so all of a sudden every night is this new lesson in sociology, like, "Oh, so that's how rich people live, oh, that's how someone lives there."

And I did it. I just lived, and I was making money, and I was handsome, and I was buying Hugo Boss suits, and the world was my oyster. And I was working hard, we had to work like 15 hours a day, but I had so much prestige. I was running, exercising twice a day. I was a yuppie living it up and making wonderful friends, starting to notice, though, that there are no other Mexicans in my world.

It gets bad when I finally – I, when I was in college – am I getting too scattered?

MS. CORDOVA: No.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So when I was in college there'd be this little group of internationally cool people. I was a nerd, and I'd look at them and I'd say, one day I want to be like them, I knew. So I'm at a gas station, I run into one of those boys, and he's Ito Romo, who became – he's an artist, and you'll probably hear his name some day. And he became a mentor, in a way – we'd been enemies and friends many times since then – but Ito was something I had to grasp onto that I hadn't found in San Antonio.

Ito and his peers represented upper-middle-class, well-educated Latino people in touch with their culture. They grew up on the border. The border was so different. They did not lose their ancestral lands, they grew up having beauty pageant winners that were Mexicans and football players and coaches and mayors and city council members and car dealers that were Mexicans, orthodontists and veterinarians.

In San Antonio we did not. We were a very invisible majority of the population. We weren't the ones – we weren't the beauty queen throwing the candy, we were the little Mexican kids chasing after the candy. So Ito and his generation represented all that world, so I've now aspired to be a bourgeois Mexican, okay? That's my next manifestation.

So, I wasn't alone. There was a critical mass of Mexican Americans, mostly gay, for some reason, I haven't studied it completely, but there was a critical mass of homosexual, Mexican American men who were mediating their culture and not just aping white culture, being able to be successful in white culture, but coming to terms with their culture.

For example, you interviewed Rolando Briseño. They're 10 years older than me, but as soon as I came out and became a member of society in San Antonio, I started befriending Mexican Americans in Rolando's age group. A: these boys mostly, like Henry Cisneros, not that he's gay, but they went to central Catholic high school, okay? So they were bourgeois boys. They were acculturated by Irish priests who said, "You can go to Harvard, you can go to Yale, you have a soul."

You know, it was like the Conquest all over again. These were the priests that were telling the Indians, "You have a soul, you can go to Harvard, and you can be president if you want." The boys were still Anglicized a lot, but it was a nice hybrid, a hybrid that I felt comfortable with, that my generation also hooked up with Rolando's generation.

So there was a critical mass of us middle – go ahead.

MS. CORDOVA: Who would you consider of your generation?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: My generation is a bit younger. My generation would be me, Chuck Ramirez, David Casas, Philip Avila, even Sandra Cisneros is between the two. But the Rolando is definitely – they were probably the first Mexican-American, bourgeois boys that were able to come out of the closet. I think that's why this hookup happened, you know.

Probably all the brothers that taught them were gay. I almost see it as a gay conspiracy, how the Latino culture evolved here. You know, it was the lesbians and the gay guys that somehow brought this to fruition, or were allowed to. And part of it might be about passing. For us to succeed in the first place we had to learn the game of wearing masks and camouflaging ourselves.

When you're gay, you learn at a very early age to camouflage and to act like the dominant group to survive. So we were probably using these skills with white culture. I wanted what white culture wanted, so I'll do what I have to do. I know it's not the real me, who cares? You know, I've been wearing a mask my whole life anyway.

So maybe – that's a theory I have, I'm not sure of it, and it's – you know, Jesse Amado, who's straight, will have a different theory. But his theories also would intersect with mine, because we're all in this kind of sexually ambiguous, artsy-fartsy conceptual, intellectual socio – you know, culturally-active battle that'd been going on in San Antonio.

So it was that generation that also had influenced me. So it's the 80s, I've come out of the closet, I'm sleeping with everyone, I have money. I'm ready to live, because no one had ever told me. So I'm –

MS. CORDOVA: I think it's also the time that AIDS had just come out. I can't help but think that you're coming out right at the same time as the news.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, and I probably presume I'm going to die any minute. So I think I, subconsciously, want to just get it over with. And I'm having unprotected sex all of these years. I meet the most amazing people in the world, and they're all dead. AIDS changed the world. And two things happened. One, it became cool to be Mexican because of altars. The whole concept of altars and Day of the Dead was kind of a product marketing – not meant to be – but it became a way that even white people were grasping to Mexican culture because it allowed a way of dealing with death and sorrow.

Oh, Mexicans, we're the best in the world. No one can touch us when it comes to death and sorrow and loss. And, you know, the gringos bought it and that's where we united. That there altares built, there were shows all about altars and shrines and –

MS. CORDOVA: Did you grow up celebrating Días de los Muertos?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Of course not. You know, not celebrating, but it existed. And this is what I had to bring to the table that I won't be able to articulate for another five or 10 years. I didn't grow up with Day of the Dead celebrations, I grew up with the dead, living amongst our family. My mother thought our cats were reincarnated spirits, you know, in the suburbs.

I grew up, not with the form, I grew up with the substance. So now the form of being Mexican became very celebrated. So I'm a yuppie and all of my friends are rich, white liberals living in the most beautiful homes in San Antonio. They have houses in Tasco and San Miguel de Allende, they speak Spanish, they wear ropas, they're all blonde, and I get invited to their fiesta parties, and they have Frida Kahlos and Diego Riveras in their houses, and there are no Mexicans at the parties.

None. Me. Me and maybe one other light skinned-friend, and the servants are Mexican. There might be some rich Mexican nationals that jetted in from Mexico City or Monterrey. Other than that, it is everyone playing Mexican wannabe. Mexican dishes, Oaxacan plates, Oaxacan mole, you know, everything Mexican. But no Mexican-Americans. I'm not the right kind of Mexican yet. They're not fully aware of the upper class, bourgeois Mexican I'm trying to be, but they're definitely not aware of the working-class Mexican-American hybrid that I really am.

That is just not on the radar screen. We don't even matter, we are just this – I'm working at USAA, and an executive says, "The population of San Antonio is actually about 150,000. Although it's a million people, if you compare it to Austin, it's really 150,000." He meant that Mexicans don't count as far as marketing or we just were mongrels, we were stray dogs in the street.

MS. CORDOVA: That was at USAA?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: That was at USAA. That was a top executive talking about that, you know. So - [laughs] -

MS. CORDOVA: What steps were you taking to educate yourself, to do your own consciousness raising?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It didn't take long. You know, I'm not a – it was – and like, oh, I was blind and now I see, you know? My mother was taught to be ashamed of who she is, my grandmother was taught to be ashamed of who she was in public, but who they really are existed and permeated the way we were brought up. It took a while to – it didn't take long to understand it, but it took a while to articulate it.

And I was just on fire for 10 years. How did I educate myself? I got drunk and I got in fights, and I talked things out, and I engaged in dialogues with people of every class. I brought up taboos, I got kicked out of parties, and I got welcomed to parties. I just lived. I talked, and I was honest as can be, and it was terrifying. It was scary how people that you thought were your best friends, when you start to articulate yourself, just thought you were from planet Mars.

Now, I hadn't learned strategies to do it correctly without offending people and threatening people, but it was purity. It was honest conversation and there was a lot of it going on in San Antonio, and that's why there was this magic period going on from the mid 80s to now, even. You know, the word "Mexican" amongst even us Mexican American artists had not been said yet.

And, of course, I aligned myself with anyone I could. People like Rolando and his peer group, most of them were gay. Some of them were in the closet, but they were all gay. And I aligned myself and I learned as much as I could, and they weren't completely right yet, either. And I was still looking for this proper utopic formula, which I might not ever find. It's what I'm seeking as an artist.

But my consciousness, as you had said, was raised, and there was no turning back after that, until the point now, that I'm mellowing out. But for a while I was a broken record, where I saw everything through the lens of cultural bias. And I still kind of do. I don't think – you know, things have improved so much and San Antonio is a bicultural city, or multicultural. And people think that just means that, you know, you decorate with Mexican flowers. It just means there are people from different world views and mindsets and value systems.

And I feel adept at it and very angry about it, and aggressive about it because of how I had grown up, where everything superior about me was because of my European white lineage, and everything inferior about me was because of my impure bloodlines, which finally boils down to Indian blood. You know, we're Asians and we're white. And everything not white is suspicious or is an issue that has to be dealt with at all times.

And I get weary of it, and I was very weary of it. So my father treated my brown stepbrother like a mule, like a working mule. And –

MS. CORDOVA: Was there a specific incident that you remember?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: My brother – yeah, just belittling. Like, my brother would want a car, you know, what do you want to do with a car? My brother vomited one time at a party and my dad just humiliated him about it for years, horrible, horrible, you know? And my brother actually was very virile, which probably my father feared too, you know?

To him my brother, which was a different race, a different racial blood, and was physically virile. And my father is a narcissist and is very virile, and beautiful also. And I was the son that had his blood and was flabby and gay and – you know what I mean? So there were these issues that I knew, even as a boy, something was going on. I could never put my finger on it, but being a greedy second child, I loved being the chosen, golden-haired son. I was blonde, even, in my early –

And I was talented in ways that my dad responded to. I was artistic and articulate, and I had – my brother had very, very – my father would describe it as peasant-like ways of communicating. "You're just like your Grandpa Ruiz," you know? The myth was that Grandma Ruiz, my Mexican grandmother – she's dead now – she and her sisters look like German ladies. They had piercing blue eyes and they had blondish hair.

The myth is that in those days there was a lot of German blood in the Mexican families, but it was something to be ashamed of because it was not through marriage, it was usually through affairs. Often, maybe illegitimate, German children were even sold to the Mexicans. These are myths, but there was – you know, if there was German blood in your family it wasn't through a fancy wedding, it was through something.

MS. CORDOVA: Miscegenation.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, exactly.

So that's what that meant. But all these things were spoken so secretly, you know. Anyway, so Grandma Ruiz looks like a big German lady, and there's Grandpa Ruiz, who is a very humble Mexican man that was not very good at expressing himself. And all he ate was pan dulce with milk. You know, just a real hen-pecked Mexican husband with a 300-pound Germanic-Mexican wife.

MS. CORDOVA: And these were your mother's parents?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: These were my mother's parents.

MS. CORDOVA: And she was born here in San Antonio?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Mom was born in San Antonio, probably grandma was too. I think we are descendents of the Canary Islanders. We don't even know what part of Mexico we're from. My dad would scoff at all that and say, "You don't speak Spanish, you don't speak English, and you don't know where you're from." We were bastard, mongrel people, you know, after a while. My dad romanticized the Mexican culture at first.

MS. CORDOVA: And he said this to you children?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: In front of us, and stuff like that. You know, you don't even speak English, you don't speak Spanish. Oh, yeah, he called my mother a whore, and my sisters were whores, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about that? Did your mother speak Spanish to you, or –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, she was very ashamed of her Spanish and so were my grandparents, and if I ever tried to speak Spanish they made me feel like a fool or they made fun of me. They said, "Oh, you speak like a Cubano," and they'd get real red and look the other way, and they would not allow us to speak Spanish.

Now, the myth in the family is that my brother, Mark, was very, very spoiled, as Mexican boys can be. So my brother is living in a little crooked house in the West Side, which is the Mexican side of town, on Leal Street. There were all these other little crooked houses all around my grandmother's house, that I find out later, are all relatives, like sisters and stuff, that she doesn't talk to. You know, there's all these feudings, you know, people fighting over crumbs.

My dad adopted – okay, so mom had this baby and then she was abandoned by the father of my brother. The story gets good – really. She's abandoned by the father of my brother. No, they divorce, they divorce. He's a womanizer. His name is Tony Calderon. He's a politico-womanizer, I think, and then has a drinking problem, very gorgeous.

But anyway, my grandmother and grandfather raise my brother. They never had any boys. They had one, but I think it died as a baby. So my brother was spoiled. He didn't have to go to school, they didn't even want him to go to school, and he was a mijito. They just made French rice for him all day long and bought him cowboy suits and spoiled him rotten.

Dad, as the Manifest Destiny European that he was, married my mother because she was pregnant with me and agreed to adopt my brother. And he meant well in his "European Manifest Destiny, he will make the world a better place" way, and maybe he did, the verdict's still out. But he feels my brother would have ended up like my cousin, you know, minimum wage jobs or heroin addicts or dead, you know, or in gangs.

So he always – once the secret was out that – I think the secret had already been out. Even though my brother was never told point blank he was adopted, he understood that dad had rescued us, you know, he had saved us from being poor Mexicans. So my brother bought into it. Recently my brother had a liver condition and finally said, "My doctor said I need to find my real father." And mom gave him all the information and he called the family, and the man had died the day before of psoriasis of the liver. So weak livers run in that side of the family, my brother does not drink.

To top it off, Tony Calderon, although he was a big drinker and all that, his nephews and sons had become successful people. And one of them was one of these Harvard Mexicans that I had clerked with years before, Raul Calderon, who was my brother's half-brother or half-cousin.

Now, he wasn't one of the ones that went through affirmative action; Tony Calderon's family was actually a good family. So here's my brother, always thinking that he was an inferior Mexican that had been rescued by my European father, when all along my brother's Mexican blood was one of the top families in the community. You know, it would have done so much for his self-esteem and all that, but he bought into the fact that, you know, dad had improved the race. How do you say that Spanish? There's an expression for it. At least in Texas there is.

So my brother now, I think, is a little scarred by that and is just this staunch, Catholic, reactionary republican that can't talk enough about Bush. And he lives in a beautiful house in the North Side. He's doing his own style of cultural activism, like, he had a Quinceañera. The high school's all white, but he gave his daughter a Quinceañera.

So he has his dagger out a little bit, too. But he's real proud of the fact of being a republican, but that's a growing phenomenon, too, among middle-class Mexican families, that they're voting republican. But he's a perfect example where extreme Catholic and republicanism has united. And he knows I'm gay and all that, but he's always niggling me about republican issues. He can have it.

[Laughter.]

But he has a beautiful swimming pool and he has a big house in a very prestigious neighborhood, and he's the uncle that made it.

MS. CORDOVA: In many ways you could have been a republican alongside him, I mean, you early direction of your life.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Possibly, maybe because I was gay I had a liberal slant to me. Maybe a lot of successful Latinos got seduced by republicanism, and maybe being gay kept us at the left and grew – that's another theory – and allowed us to become more enlightened by hanging around with more enlightened people. Because I really did – it took me a while to learn.

It was just lessons that were learned that I eventually. I remember I took a – Ito Romo, who in a way is almost an aristocrat, you know, he'd laugh if he were here, but he does, he's noblesse oblige. He has an aristocratic way of thinking, his father's family owned the Mexican bus companies. And his mother is probably from working class.

So he was a more extreme example of the hybrid, like I am, a class hybrid. But in some ways he's so aristocratic

that it would just drive me crazy, but in many other ways he was enlightened, you know? And I really still was cocky and arrogant and thought that if anybody worked as hard as I did they would make it. It took a while of working in corporate America, of being mistreated myself, of seeing others mistreated, of seeing myself being given breaks when other people weren't, it took that sensitivity, and it took a while to understand that.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you ever just felt racialized as a child? I mean, was that – did you suddenly feel different from that suburban existence?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, different, but even being Italian would have been different enough, or living in a mobile home. You know, we've actually got a nice house and had land, but I knew what it was like to be not one of the beautiful blonde kids. But I did have a strong personality. I was as popular as I could possibly be, and I was one of the smartest kids. I find out now that I was in top 1 percent in my IQ test. Now, they should have done something about that.

So the school plays – and, you know, the German kids would get all the good parts, and then they'd find out that I was the best singer and they'd say, you know, why didn't we put you? You know, well, I'm thinking, I don't know, because I'm a fat, brown-haired kid with weird parents that aren't blonde Germans. Yeah, slight, nothing compared to my Latino friends. Nothing. You know –

MS. CORDOVA: How's the obvious sort of educational tracking?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Like the ABC –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. I was an elite. I mean, I definitely was probably one of the smartest, if not the smartest kid in the school. I mean, it's a small school. But I wonder if the teachers knew that or not. But I never really was – there was a glass ceiling, but it was very, very, very subtle. And I was the good Catholic kid, and my parents were so strict.

[End Side A, Tape 1, Begin Side B.]

You know, there was that romanticization that I was the good Catholic kid that everybody wanted their kids to hang around with. And if I got to do something, everybody in town got to do it.

I mean, I had – my dad was a tyrant. He was a fascist. He was very fascist, and almost to the point of mental illness. Really, I thought life was just sorrow. I just thought you were just supposed to cry and be beat up if you went to go see a movie. And how he treated my sisters – have you ever seen that movie *Carrie*? You know the scary mother?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I can't watch it because it's too close – if you saw my parents you'd think they're charming and nice, but it really captures that creepiness that that Piper Laurie character has, this Catholic, almost sexually erotic weirdness that my parents were involved in.

MS. CORDOVA: Very controlling.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Very controlling. And my mother was older than my father and always felt intellectually – and was – no, I don't think she was – but felt intellectually and culturally and socially inferior to my father. So she would allow any tricks to happen to keep the marriage together, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: And they both raised you as Catholic? They were both from Catholic families?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Very, very, very Catholic, yeah. My mother's family would not have been the ideal Mexican family, going to church and all that. They were a bit scattered. And the girls turned out all pretty sexy. They were sexy girls, and they may have used that as a mechanism of self-improvement, which they did. They all married – a couple of them married better, married their way out of the West Side and out of their social class. But they weren't – they were kind of – my mother was religious, but her sisters weren't that religious.

MS. CORDOVA: And are you still a practicing Catholic?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, my God, no.

MS. CORDOVA: So when did that change for you?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think even in – this does bring back things.

So I have this little fantasy going on. Before I become a born-again Mexican, I'm this classy Catholic. That's kind of my fantasy going on. You know what I mean? I'm a good Catholic boy going to a good Catholic school with good Catholic friends. It was rumblings of being anti-WASP. I mean, that's as close as I could get, as far as rebelling. So that's weird, I was rebelling in the form of being a Catholic, but I was still being anti-WASP, which most of my friends were WASP, you know. So I had this fantasy of a good Catholic, Kennedy-type family or something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you an altar boy, ever?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I don't think I was cute enough to be an altar boy. The priest didn't like me. He always like the cute boys as the altar boys. I was too chubby. Now I can figure out what that was all about. [Laughter.] But I taught C.C.D. [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] and all this kind of stuff, and I was very honest about confession. You know, did I believe it all at the time? I just believed it was something you didn't question.

Now, going to Catholic university, St. Mary's, I mean, we even had religious classes. But all my teachers, I am sure now, were gay. You know, were lesbian nuns and gay brothers. And between the lines, they would teach us real progressive stuff. Like I remember even remembering my nuns in my Catholic school - I mean not Catholic, but my small town. We had Benedictine nuns, and they got in trouble with the Pope for wearing their skirts too short.

[Laughter.]

And remember, this was the Catholicism of guitar playing. And it seemed kind of cool at the time. So we had these really militant nuns that were beautiful. They probably were lesbians. They'd give themselves boys' names: Sister Paul, Sister John. They played the guitar, they wore light pastel dresses, and their dresses were miniskirts. The Pope, the Vatican sent a letter that they had to wear their dresses longer because they were getting so extreme. And I wanted to be one of those nuns.

So I had kind of - Catholicism even seemed more liberal than other things. I remember the nuns would teach us - they'd say not to tell our parents - but they would teach us evolution and stuff like that that they weren't supposed to be teaching. So there was some weird stuff - there's always something going on between the lines. And even university teaching, I'm happy with what I learned. I think I learned - it was still within a Roman Catholic framework, but once intellectual pursuits were pursued, they were right on, I feel. I feel some things were discussed that were progressive and open-minded and philosophies that I feel comfortable with. But as far as -

MS. CORDOVA: So it was a sort of leftists' liberal progressive -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, what did you use to call it? Uh-huh. In the closet, uh-huh. Subverted.

MS. CORDOVA: But at the same time you also were learning your own history, Mexican -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. We still weren't learning any of that. There probably were - probably not, though. I think still that only 3 to 6 percent of the makeup of UT Austin [University of Texas, Austin] was Mexican. It was still just - I mean, at best, you could become white like me. At best. That's as good as it got, maybe. And probably - but maybe two or three years later there would start being socially conscious Latinos.

UTSA was built way out in the North Side, where all the whites lived, and where all Latinos would have to commute. All these little colleges all over the place now weren't open yet. You know, it was just grab a life-vest while you can and maybe get a few crumbs. Yes, there was a Mexican upper-class bourgeois going on. But they pretty much kept to themselves.

MS. CORDOVA: And you said your father painted.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: My dad, yes. My dad fancied himself a renaissance man and does really bad paintings, which I'm kind of doing with this show coming up, not even tongue-in-cheek, I guess I grew to love them. But he'd paint the Coliseum and ruins and all that. And he fancied himself an artist, yeah. And he is an artist.

But a lot of my artistry came from my mother. And that didn't flow out till much later. But my father would beg my mother to clean the house, and she wouldn't do it. She suffered what Victor Zamudio Taylor calls - the horror vacui, the fear of empty spaces. So there were piles of laundry and piles of outfits never finished that were being sewn, and 20 lampshades and five toaster ovens and every Cool-Whip container from the last 20 years. Nothing could be thrown away. And my father would beg and beg and beg. He wanted this beautiful, clean, idyllic "Italian clean," as they say, house. You know, Italians are very tidy inside their houses, almost neurotically. And now his new wife is too skinny and too clean. Even she can't please him.

So - [laughs] - what was the question?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I was just asking about your father's artistry, and then you sort of led into your mother's.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, so my mother. Yes. But it's my mother whose artistry really is the hybrid of three things. It is the discipline and the self-confidence, and almost this Manifest Destiny, or this European way of looking at things that I have inherited from my father, I must admit. You know, even San Antonio. I would give away everything I own. I would work and work and work to make the city beautiful and orderly, and better, and more gorgeous, and fill every parking lot with a beautiful building. You know, where does that come from? It's not quite the Mexican in me. You know, the Mexican in me finds beauty in the way things are, and I learned that later. But the Italian in me wants to build and improve and make the ground fertile - that European things.

Then there's the white modernism, minimalism that influenced me too. I'm gay, I'm growing up in South Texas, I'm five-years-old and seeing a *Weekly Reader*, and I see this little black-and-white photo of an Andy Warhol exhibit or a Rauschenberg exhibit. And I know in my deep - my gay DNA that there's an oasis there, that there's refuge there. There is someplace that people like me would be safe and privileged.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you having an opportunity to learn about these artists in school? Did you have artistic creativity?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was always the school artist. I was always the school artist. There would probably be like a *Weekly Reader*. There'd be like a - no. But, you know, the few little - doesn't take much to hold onto. And we gay boys grew up in Texas. And I remember my friend, Garret Mormondo [ph], he heard that song, "We Are Family" or something like that on the radio. You know, he'd only heard country music. And it only took two seconds for his parents flipping the channel and him hearing that and saying, "wait," and he had changed forever.

So, you know, it doesn't take much. Water seeks its own level, as my friend Drew Allen said. And, yeah, there'd be glimpses. You'd be at a department store and you'd see these people from a different class, or from a different world, or from a different sensibility and you'd know, oh, that world exists and I'm going to get me some of that someday, or I want that, you know?

So I don't become socially mobile until law school. It takes me two seconds to figure it all out. You know, there's Blue Star art spaces happening and there's Contemporary Art World. There's all these AIDS fundraisers and I am sleeping with boys that are smart and are even not modernists, they are not minimalists. They are celebrating Mexican culture in this really hippie, cool, progressive over-the-top way which I will later replicate in my shops and in my artwork. So I'm digesting that.

At the same time, I'm being welcomed into homes of privileged, mostly white, people with expensive homes and expensive cars and good educations: the good life, I think at the time. And I keep having this -

MS. CORDOVA: Are you out to them?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Now I'm out and, you know, I'm the new boy in town. And I imagine my life's just going to get better and better. And I'm a lawyer and I haven't even made a piece of art yet, and I know, somehow, I'm going to be showing in beautiful white-cube, prestigious museums throughout the world and be invited to the most elegant, beautiful women's houses in the world. I don't know how I'm going to do it, I just know it's going to happen.

And within 10 years it happened. Within 10 years I'm in the Whitney Biennial [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY]. And I say it on the tape. I said, "I knew this was going to happen and it's not what I thought." [Laughs.] You know, it's not what I thought it was going to be. And I thought people who were modern and enlightened and like minimalist art, that was going to be a refuge for me. And I just realized there's all kinds of other walls and ceilings and closed minds, just the setting's different. So I just had a show at Marfa [Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas]. Marfa is all about Donald Judd. Donald Judd is all about white, macho artists that are talented, but are creating this utopic world.

And I visit this, and I was still attracted to it because the women, not the men-folk, but the women-folk, who were part of this modern world, were enlightened, well-educated women. And as an artist, I have mostly been empowered by this subgroup. It is rich - not necessarily rich - educated, art-world, straight, white women. There have been a few Latino gays, there have been a few white gays, there have been a few maybe gay women that have empowered me, but normally it is this rich-white-woman world that has allowed me - maybe as a gay person or as a Latino person - to enter the doors of the art world and of social mobility.

So Donald Judd-modernism and the de Menil collection [The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas] and all of this high art-world stuff, Michael Tracy, Linda Pace, Alamo Heights, Houston, you know, the Contemporary Arts Museum,

Blue Star [Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio, Texas]. Oh, my God, I am a peer of these people, at least I think I am. I'm getting on boards that they're on, welcomed to their homes. I never knew. And I loved it and I ate it up.

MS. CORDOVA: And this is in your position as a professional, as a lawyer.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. As an art-loving professional, starting to be taken seriously as an artist, which really is a great, lucky twist of fate.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. So how does that happen?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So I'm going to the bars and I just meet beautiful people with beautiful clothes and beautiful lives. And I want some of that. [Laughing.] You know, I keep saying that. [Laughter.] But that's a big theory, the theory of desire. There was this desire that in my generation – now I desire nothing. I don't want any material possessions. I don't. I'm just going to have my toothbrush and my pills. And we'll get to pills later, okay.

Oh, and then there's drugs and partying and pleasure. Oh, so remember, I went to the party. I told you that it was a fiesta party and everybody's in fiesta garb and there's no Mexicans. Well, I put my money where my fucking mouth was and I started throwing the best parties in San Antonio. And I invited transvestites and I invited fat people and skinny people and poor Mexicans and the richest ladies in town, and Republicans and devil worshippers and politically correct lesbians and Log Cabin Republicans. And I had cocaine, and the best liquor, and a beautiful glass house with only two Mies van der Rohe chairs in it.

And I spent every paycheck just – I had this – I was so pathetic, I loved San Antonio so much. I had this dream that it was going to become this cosmopolitan city, with the rich Mexicans from Mexico City and gangster boys and white elite and smart people.

MS. CORDOVA: I read you describing it as “San Antonio was like the Paris of the 1920s.”

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Where did you hear that?

MS. CORDOVA: That was in an interview or something like that.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh. That's going to come out again. But that took a while. That's after I quit being a lawyer. But I had that vision. And don't forget, Sandra Cisneros is in town. People like Rolando Briseño are coming into their own. There's a critical mass of us that are saying: we came from somewhere amazing and beautiful and hip. And you know what? White people aren't all that. And you know what? Rich people aren't all that. And you know what? Educated people aren't.

It was just a time of maturity and celebration, and it was awesome. And of anger and of fighting, you know, of good, healthy fights. Because, you know, I passed for a white boy, and I was one of the cutest new boys in town. And I was rich and I was very handsome and working out. So I can't tell you how important this mobility, through sexuality, was, because it was – I can go into any city in the world and I can meet the most elite people if I'm good-looking enough, or if I look good, you know. It's an interesting tool, having that as a gay man – or maybe as a gay woman – but definitely as a gay man. I can go into any city and get social entrée through gay subculture, through maybe sex or through personality or through position. It's a club.

MS. CORDOVA: It is fascinating to hear you describing this identity as your entrée.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: But also it must have been a struggle to reckon with.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, well, it did. Well, luckily I wasn't alone. There was – it takes one to know one. So friends of my social class and are gay, we found each other right away. And we formed this unspoken group. I also befriended like Anglos, and most of them were younger. They were my mentees, and I was educating them and educating them. And my mentors, some of them were white. And I was educating them, and educating them because they'd find me charming and intelligent and one of them.

And whenever I tried to show them a little bit of where I come from, some of them would reject it. You know, that there was things – they all loved Mexican culture, Oaxacan culture, or high-class Mexican culture. But no one yet respected Tex-Mex hybridity. And I didn't know if I respected it yet, I was working on that.

Anyway, yes, there were struggles because I was pretty much perceived as a white boy. I became more Latino through the years, I think, but I was perceived as a white boy, yeah, and so I'd be allowed into peer groups of very, very wealthy white, aristocratic white boys that I was flattered to be part of. And it looked like I was in a Ralph Lauren commercial, but I had to assert who I was.

And, you know, I didn't yet want the white boys to start dating Mexican gangster boys, but I wanted – I had this fantasy the city would become this integrated city where people of different classes were also racially and culturally mixed. And I just wanted the city to be an interesting, cosmopolitan hybrid. And in many ways it is now, compared to how it was at one time. You can't go to a party now and not see any Mexicans, but you could as little as 10-years-ago.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, how did your family respond to you coming out?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Very cool. I wrote a new book and it's coming out in 2005, and it's going to tell all these little stories in little joke form.

MS. CORDOVA: What is it, *Historia de un Amor*?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, but we've changed it. We've had to anglicize the title. It's going to be called *High Pink*.

MS. CORDOVA: *High Pink*?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughing.] Okay.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But it's still pretty Mexican because it's going to be a hot pink cover. Yeah, my dad jokes that – he doesn't joke. He said, first of all, so many funny things. One theory is he says it's his fault, because he wanted the baby to be a girl and he kept calling the baby Francesca to my mother, he'd talk to my mother's stomach. So that's his – you know, that's how narcissistic he is. He willed a female, and he got one. [Laughter.]

Two, and this is a real sick theory. "Well, are you the man or the woman in the relationship?" I said, "Dad, it's not like that anymore." I go, "But if you want to know, I'm usually the male part." He goes, "Oh, then you're not gay." [Laughing.] So I started thinking, what does that mean? Do you know what that implies. Oh, then you're not gay because everybody does that. You know, so who knows what that meant.

Another theory was I was just trying to be trendy, you know. He was very proud of me. I mean, I did become what his father wanted him to become, I became a lawyer. And I had money. He probably thought I was so spoiled that I was now tinkering into kinky things, and decided to be a gay boy because it was fashionable. But they've been very cool about it. They never made me feel ashamed of it or anything like that.

MS. CORDOVA: Your mother too?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I think if I had not achieved a level of social class above theirs, then they would have thought I would be ruining my life. Because that's kind of what that generation feared. They just thought gay people were the most extreme cases they would see. You know, forlorn transvestites, penniless and alcoholic. Or they thought we'd have no friends or no happiness in our lives. That was the big fear that you'd always hear, that homosexuals were unhappy people. And boy, were they wrong. And I would tell them how wonderful my life is, and they'd meet all my decent friends. They knew I was part of an intellectual, artistic community.

MS. CORDOVA: And what kind of law were you practicing?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Corporate and real estate, and it was very, very boring. And I wasn't that good at it, you know, because by then I was boozing and drugging and partying. And, you know, and I'd go to bed with somebody and go to work the next day in the same suit. You know, I was making up for all of the good times I had missed. So I really – I was like 15-years-old with a lot of money. And I still worked hard, but it was such boring work. I just hated it. And I did it for 10 years. But there were so many people that loved what they were doing, and I was not one of those. And I hate corporate America and the way it forced you to act a certain way.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you ever shy? Was this sort of a coming out –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Definitely. Yeah, I always felt a little – I mean, I'm sure everyone at work knew about it, but I always felt it was my duty not to force my morals on other people. Maybe I was just being a coward, but I just didn't want to do it. The cruel thing is I didn't care enough about these people to even do that. You know, I wasn't that close – a few friends at work I came out to. I know with my talents and my personality, I could have forged an amusing way of dealing with it, you know? I could have become that character in that sitcom, that it works. But I didn't want to – I mean, I had too many other battles to fight.

So me being the accepted homosexual employee at my law firm was not my battle. There were others that were doing that, but my battle was bigger. I had social and societal upheaval that I wanted to accomplish. And so, you know, let's say I was put on a board at – so I had two lives. I had Franco, the wild playboy lawyer that wants to be an artist, and Franco the lawyer that, I don't know what his life's all about, but he's always late for work. You

know, I'd try to keep both lives.

But then as I became better known as an artist, then, you know, it broke my heart because I could tell all of these mainstream and well-educated people that I was working with – I could have been nicer – not nicer to them, but I could have been more educating to them. I just was too busy. And, you know, the work environment, it was so macho and so potentially homophobic that I didn't even go there. It wasn't necessary.

Anyway, and then I also went through the demons of perhaps feeling I wasn't being taken seriously as an artist. That I was just a rich boy, dilettante, wannabe, ethnic artist all of a sudden. So here I am having all the privileges of being a white boy, and then, da-dah!, now I want to be a Latino artist. You know what I mean?

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: I do. I do. I'm going to stop this tape and put in a new one, and that's probably a good breaking point.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, that is.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. Let's stop here.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right. We are recording again. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Franco Mondini-Ruiz. This is Session One and Disc Two

And actually, while I'm thinking of it, Franco, when did you finally add the Ruiz to your name?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It's the mid-80s again and I –

MS. CORDOVA: The story of your name actually because you have an official –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. First of all, my parents, like I say, were from different classes and they lived unhappily ever after. One of the biggest fights is my father is sent back to Italy to finish his tour of duty, and he's also in trouble for getting my mom pregnant and all that. But my dad says, "Do not name – if it's a boy, do not name him Gino. You only name boys after their father, only if the father is dead, so I would take that as a very bad omen so please don't do that." Sure enough, she names him – names me Gino. And then Francisco is my grandfather's name, so there's – that is the Mexican side and then there's Mondini.

It's the mid-80s in San Antonio and I've seen the light, as you recall, and I'm trying to get put on boards and trying to get on everybody's mailing list. And there's always mailing lists where – oh, not mailing lists, but there's an invitation or a fundraiser and there are 80 prominent names on the list, the kind of people that live in Alamo Heights and go shopping in New York, once in a while, and know the art scene. The liberal Democrat Party-types, and there's not one Mexican there. So I'm just sick of it and I think at least I'm going to show that I'm a Mexican. At least I'll be on this list and there'll be at least one Mexican name on there.

So that's how it started. It started I just didn't want to hide my Latino culture under my father's Italian surname. Just as your name had been Irish, you might have been wanting to – you know, show part of your identity. So I did that and it just was at least to get one more name on the – and there was a time where just every single thing like that was just a big battle. I'd be put on boards and I'd say, "I will not be put on the board unless you put an Hispanic female." I said, "The majority of San Antonio is Hispanic females and you don't have one on your list." So it was those little political activist activities that I was really getting into.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel political? When did you start to feel – it sounds like you did?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I wonder what caused it? I think I became politicized as I started realizing I was being pressured a certain way how to act, and if I would talk about things from a different perspective, other than the cool, white status quo of the city, that some people were just ready to be on my side, and some people were just telling me to shut up. You know, when I had white friends that would get to show in Mexico about Mexican art and they weren't Mexicans, and I'd bring it up. I'd go, "Well, why don't Mexicans get to be in Mexican shows from San Antonio?" you know? "Come on, man, that's reverse discrimination. You have it better than anybody else in this town," you know. That's when I became really politicized.

Whenever you'd even start to express anything – if you'd say like, "Why aren't there any Mexicans at this party?" or things like that or, you know, I'd be with white new friends in the gay bars or something and they'd say, "Uh, there's Cha-Cha queens coming here." You know, "We've got to put a stop to that." And I'd say, "I'm Mexican." You know, it didn't take long to realize I had to take make a step. And there was just – plus, like once again, there was that critical mass emerging where we were taking politics into our own hands.

There was a generation ahead of us that was politically active. They didn't quite know what to do with we more assimilated, acculturated Latinos who hung around with the rich white folk. They didn't know what to do with us. We didn't know what to do with ourselves yet either. And plus then there was all the arguments of who was more Mexican than thou, which is still a problem: who's the right kind of Mexican, who's the sellout, who's the coconut, who's not? Who was there first?

MS. CORDOVA: Right. I like Rolando Briseño's, "Will the real Chicano please stand up?"

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Rolando was a very good influence on me. I think I had good mentors, and I treated those people as mentors. I wanted to learn and I prospered. And I hope I've given back to them and I hope I'm helping other people. And one of my friends that I keep bringing up, Ito Romo, even though there have been times that I've hated him: I'm remembering now a really important realization.

So I'm happy - you know, I'm with Ito and all these kind of bourgeois Mexican kids: what I always wanted to be, you know? And we're driving down Commerce Street and it's the Tejano Music Awards, and I say something like - 'cause, you know, when you're with your friends everything is a joke and you're drinking and driving and having fun. I see these four-foot-two chocolate-brown Mexican women shaped-like, you know, the big Fig Newtons, and they're wearing these short turquoise dresses with silver belts and silver shoes and wigs. And I go, "Ito, why do they - why do we dress like this? Why do we - why do they dress like this?" And Ito goes, "What are you talking about? They're beautiful and they think they're beautiful and they are beautiful."

My fantasy at the time was, you know, overweight Mexican women would be in ankle-length black skirts with a Vidal Sassoon pageboy and some Spratling silver earrings and red Chanel lipstick. You know what I mean? I wanted to turn Mexican women all into that.

MS. CORDOVA: *Vogue* magazine.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, uh-huh. And it would have been nice too. But the problem is what women are wearing right then is what ended up being in *Vogue*. So Ito taught me the Twist, he taught me the Spin, and I have spun ever since and I will always owe that to him. Why we're not best friends any more I keep forgetting, but it also is part of this bigger story why we Latinos have not been able to quite be consensus builders, and haven't been able to really take ourselves to the next place, unless it's happening right now: you interviewing me and all this is happening, maybe. I think it is. I hope it is. But there was a long, long period where we don't seem to let each other prosper, up to a certain degree. But I'm only feeling now confident and magnanimous because I have prospered, but I had to leave town, or I would have been killed. I would have died.

MS. CORDOVA: So what advice would you give to someone to sort of say "these are the steps to become a Latino artist?"

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] So what path did you follow? Like, what did you suddenly realize you needed to do?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I've done almost everything well, I think. I really followed my heart, and I was passionate and sincere about what I've done. I've been generous with everyone, I've tried. I've accepted my friends and all their foibles and they've accepted me. You know, I have Anglo friends that tell me, you know, "Don't hang around with these losers any more." And these losers are the people that made me what I am today.

One of my friends, Michael - he's not a loser. Michael, you're not a loser. But somebody that might be perceived wrongly as a loser because he's this long-haired, hippy-looking guy that owns nothing; he helped my career. It's his little sentence that he wrote about what I did with *Infinito Botánica* [Mexican folk-healing shop turned boutique] that was put as a quote on a wall text that got me the "Whitney Biennial [2000]." You know, it was -

MS. CORDOVA: What was the quote?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was - "Infinito Botánica was a place that finally allowed a space," it just makes you cry. I can't even say it. [Laughter.] But a very moving text, you know. And it was true. It had become a place for others. It became a place for the queer, for the disenfranchised, for all of us who thought there was no place for us at the table. And instead of making a place, we created our own table like no one else had ever had. You know, it was real what was going on. And it's these quotes that I'm never going to forget, you know, that my friends had said. And sure it's all talk. [Laughs.] Mexicans are - the actions from these friends aren't as good, but the eloquent words and the passions and the sentiment, that's where the white boy-brown boy fight always happened.

Rolando is like me. We're like Germans: we do work and we do push in ways that some Mexicans might consider tacky - that we're pushy, we're like white boys. And then I have so many Mexican friends that are eloquent and

passionate and polite that somehow think saying they're going to do something is the same as doing something. And as stereotypical and cliché as it sounds, it just happens so many times. You know, saying, "Yes, I'll be there," or "Yes, I'll call you back," or "Yes, I'll volunteer and help you," or "Yes, you can stay at my house," or "Yes, I'll pledge \$500," or "Yes, I'll mail that package."

I'm sure all cultures do it. But definitely it has ruined so many opportunities of what could have been. The words are polite and sweet, you know? And it's kind of Mexican where just the eloquence and the courtliness of saying something starts to matter as much as doing it itself, and there seems to be a rift in that, the talk and the action, you know? Like, a gringo might not do the talk; might just say, "I'll be damned if I'm going to do that for you," and they end up doing it for you. But they did it. A Latino will say, "Franco, consider it done," you know? "Bueno, of course. You know you can always stay with me," you know? And then you're like, "Where are you? You said you were going to be here. I'm hungry," you know. You find out later they were on the other side of the door and they just didn't want to be bothered - [laughter] - so, I'm serious.

MS. CORDOVA: I know.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I've seen it so many times, I was like - so that was the white boy, you know, "My friend said I could stay with them, so I will stay with them." And I'd be like - I won't name names, but like - you know, I'll just say Joe, "Joe, how can you do that? That's your cousins. They drove all the way from Monterrey." You know, "I can't be bothered." I said, "But I was with you when you said they could stay with you." You know, it's just - [laughs] - Right? I don't know.

But there is some little - and my friends and I, those of us that have, quote, "made it" talk about this rift between spoken generosity and the action of generosity. And I really try to do both. But sometimes I'm shocking because I'll say, "No, I can't do that. My ticket is full" and I'll still do it. So that is the acculturation and assimilation process that I went through. So I've learned some Anglo skills. And you tread on dangerous water once you start talking about what culture is better than the other.

And I'm still dealing with it as an artist. You know, maybe you should - as a culture - culture means culture. Culture means it's a group of people that will do things a certain way, so maybe it's not a taboo to talk about. But it's something I'm still dealing with. And the ideal once again, is the hybridization. And I'm not trying to say I am the face of the hybridization, but I am a person that's cognizant of it, and possibly, you are too. I don't want to get into your personal life, but it's no mean coincidence that you and I are both bicultural Latinos.

MS. CORDOVA: Both half.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, that we're half breeds.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. And maybe that much more conscious of a certain identity or how our identity is constructed?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, and a knowledge of difference. You know, I think Anglos think everyone thinks like them, and Latinos think everyone thinks like them. And then we know that they don't. I think people are all basically the same, based on DNA. I mean, for the last even thousands of years we were the same. But, you know, through socialization we change, and there's some very precious, wonderful things about the socialization that Latinos have gone through, and some very worthwhile things that Anglos have gone through.

Anyway, so what would be my recipe for success for a Latino artist?

MS. CORDOVA: Or you can just -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: One, return your fucking phone calls. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Communication.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But, you know - yes. Communication skills are - fear of the phone, fear of the e-mail, fear of the fax, that things are just going to happen? No, it's not going to happen. And I had to learn the hard way too, I really did. Communication skills, communicating, following up with promises that you make; you've just got to keep them. You've just got to do, you know, you can't charm your way out of every single thing.

But really, communication skills are what's really, I think, hurting us Latinos a lot in the - Two: recognize what the rules are, play by them, win by them and then change them. And that's cocky, but those are the rules, you know, and unless you win the lottery or change the world, those are the rules and they're not that hard.

MS. CORDOVA: Or create a separate universe?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: [Laughs.] Or create a separate universe, yes. Exactly. If you so choose to, you know? But even creating that separate universe, you're going to need resources and we are not the dominant culture. We are not and we still only get the crumbs, I feel, even in San Antonio. We get the crumbs. So it's going to be hard separating your own universe, so get those crumbs and spin and turn them on their side. Fight.

I see things as cultural battles, I really do. I want more. I want more for my people, you know? [Laughter.] You know, I really do. I want more for San Antonio, and everybody will be better off. I want the rich to give more and the rich to make things happen. And I have some very wealthy friends in liberal places that didn't do enough, and I had to cut them out of my life. I really did because life is so short and I'm so impatient and I think things could happen so fast and so easily, I think.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you put your first show together? What show was that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay, I'm sure I'm going to die of AIDS any minute, and I am in my Brooks Brothers/Hugo Boss suits and I come home from my sterile, fluorescently lit office and, yes, I'm having sex and, yes, I'm working out and, yes, I'm finally – I'm handsome and happy and, you know, top of the world. But the sex isn't enough, nothing is enough. I just know I'm going to die. So I'm making like cheesy alters, I think, very Catholic, very baroque, but out of anything. I was making alters out of toilet paper and spray paint, and I wouldn't even take my suits off, I'd have to create art so badly.

And it was just beautiful. It was neoclassical things, but mixed with rasquache, you know, imperfect. And my friends would see my art, because by then I had befriended the artsy types – the gay artsy types, you know, the effete, the cool, young, good-looking effete, you know. And they liked my work and I just kept making it until Dave Hickey, one of the most important curators in the world, comes to my house. Now, the reason he comes to my house is because I'm a glamorous, young guy living in Alamo Heights. I'm networking, you know. I've turned my crumbs into ways of – and he came to my house because it was – he didn't do drugs, but it was a fun – it was a hip place to be, it was a hip – and so he was there. He liked my art and before long I was put in a show. Maybe not underneath his direction, but he was one of the curators and he was very kind to me.

In the meantime, Latino friends are starting to get more organized, so there's the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center [San Antonio, Texas], Graciela Sánchez.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And then there is Michael Martinez, who I brought up earlier. They're starting to have shows and multi-cultie is in, Day of the Dead is in, people coming out of the closet is in. So there's things going on. And I'm kind of a dilettante, socialite artist being allowed to enter those shows. And people really like my work. And then I do a show with David Casas and then – ha, ha, ha – Ito Romo comes back into the picture. Remember, Ito I loved because Ito represented all this bourgeois, Mexican prince world. He was a prince, you know. He gets jealous of my success as an artist and really, really sabotages my career for years, much to my pain.

MS. CORDOVA: How?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: He's very charming and everyone likes him and he's a good artist and we're both Gemini twins and we're one day apart and all these things going on. And he pretty much maligns me or makes me, like, I'm abusing my position or I'm not a real Mexican or downright telling the gallery that represents him, if they represent me, he's going to not show with them any more, you know, and guffawing at me behind my back. And I was big enough to take all of that. But, yeah, always a thorn in my side. Always like I was a wannabe artist. And by then he and Rolando and a few other artists were the successful ones, and I still came across as a socialite wannabe.

MS. CORDOVA: Who were your alters dedicated to?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: The very first alters would have been with no meaning, just pieta, just this – you know, just beautiful Catholic, Romanic classical. Some of them turned out really just beautiful. They were made just out of paper. At the same time, there is Danny Lozano at Tienda Guadalupe who totally loved me, and I loved him. And his world became the visual manifestation of what was what I celebrated after that.

But in all honesty, we must remember that Danny had simply gotten the confidence and put his own mark on something that was really gringo-driven. Tienda Guadalupe was started by Big Mike. It was the white –

[END TAPE 1; START TAPE 2]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: – white, elite gays that were first embracing Latino culture before we Latinos would have. Does that make sense to you? So it was a white thing.

So Danny added a layer of authenticity but it really wasn't authentic. He had to learn about all that stuff through white people. But what he did and what I did is that we twisted and added a layer of substance to it, not just the form but the substance where, yeah, we didn't believe in Day of the Dead because we weren't taught that because only Mexican poor people from across the river did that.

But we also believed that, you know, our dogs had spirits of our ancestors and, you know, bizarre things like that. So he was one of – he was me. I mean, he understood that part of me and it was unspoken. And he added that layer of authenticity to the exotica of our culture.

So it went from authentic Mexican to culture vulture Gringo to Tex-Mex Latino who had entered the same class as the white Latinos that were collecting the stuff. So it's so funny how objects change their meanings as they flip-flop through different generations. Danny died.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. In 1992 or something?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think so. Craig had the store. Craig has the store. Craig loved Danny. Craig loves me. But there was always some suspicion as to – there was never a deep respect for who we are, our middle class Mexican American culture. And then there was Sandra Cisneros who was articulating it. There was Rolando Briseño. There was myself. There was Ito. There was a bunch of people that were finally articulating it.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you meet Sandra?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was still a glamorous lawyer and I'd just flown in from a big project in New York and she was washing my dishes.

MS. CORDOVA: Seriously? [Laughter.] How did that work?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I wouldn't lock my house. I lived in this gorgeous, gorgeous, very, very fancy looking glass box, that I'd have the air conditioner turned down to 68 degrees and I had two Mies van der Rohe chairs and exotic chickens and a big huge bed with \$1,000 sheets and that's it.

MS. CORDOVA: You were really living the high life –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was living the high life.

MS. CORDOVA: – in the 1980s.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Uh-huh [affirmative].

MS. CORDOVA: You were on top.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And mixed with a little of bit of Spanish colonial objects. I mean, I knew I was on to something but I didn't realize I had skipped so many generations. I was already, like, aesthetically equivalent to like an old rich Houston queen. I mean, I usurped this culture. So Michael Tracy would be at my house and Sandra Cisneros because Ito, Ito would show off my – I think he was more in love with my house than me. So he would show off my house to his – you know, it was a big statement. And not only that, it was on the most expensive street in San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Where was it?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It's on Geneseo and I was next door neighbors to Lowry Mays who is the richest San Antonian, owns Clear Channel Communications. They're probably worth billions. And then my other neighbor was Adela Sepulveda, a 6-foot tall gorgeous Mexican, high-class, snobby beauty that spoke in a British accent with platinum white hair and ankle-length mink coats, who knew everyone from Dolly Parton to – And so it was just some wonderful time.

And once again, remember, I'm thin and tanned and just full of energy. It was a great time. So I used all of these skills to – I forgot what I was doing – accomplish something. And I didn't let anyone – God, I was just so tireless in preaching. I was a preacher boy. I was tired of preaching but I was always – because there were so many politically incorrect things. Not even politically incorrect, there were just so much crass insensitivity to the differences in cultures and viewpoints towards things.

MS. CORDOVA: But your house was serving as a meeting point for people or –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. It could be because I never locked it. So there would always be somebody new at my house. And, you know –

MS. CORDOVA: And Sandra was just there?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Sandra was there, hanging out, uh-huh. I think she was a bit suspicious of – she was very guarded with who she'd meet. And Ito could have easily had the charm and the power to keep me from getting too close to her. He was threatened by that and he did try.

But remember where I was saying how actions speak louder? Ito was the type that would make all these wonderful, florid promises. You can't help but love him. He's charming. You might even interview him some day. Extremely charming. But I'd be the one who would deliver, you know.

So the old girlfriends of mine finally told Sandra, you know, yeah, Franco is mean and he gets really drunk and he's crass and – you know, I'm not a caballero. I'm not, Ito truly is. But they'd say he's the one you can really depend on when you need something. He's never let me down. So it was almost the Gringo side of me that allowed Sandra to develop this close bond and trust with me.

MS. CORDOVA: And I don't want to jump too far ahead.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, no.

MS. CORDOVA: But the Dave Hickey show, was that the sculpture show?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that your first show? 1989.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think that would have been, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Even before the Esperanza show?

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It is?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay. I'm getting mixed up. But, oh my God, yes. So what an entrée I made. And I would have been in the show with Jesse Amado. And there's Jesse and really handsome. And in those days, any good looking guy I saw, I thought, umm – I'm going to. I'm still that way, I guess, but especially back then.

I'm sure I flirted with him. And I was still doing figurative and very religious based art and he was doing the more sophisticated conceptual art which I remember not feeling deserving to do it because I wasn't educated as an artist. I think I said something offensive like, "Isn't it too easy to do something like that?"

You know what I mean, I was so green. And I didn't mean to offend him but, you know, it didn't take long until – I just learned fast. I saw the light. I said like, "Oh I am allowed to make art like that." I don't have to have a Ph.D. in art or – you know, you just don't know. I didn't have role models and things happened fast.

So I think that influenced me, seeing another Mexican American making very simple conceptual art. I just thought it was something that only – maybe I never said it or even – I didn't even articulate it to myself. I just presumed it was something smart, white, older, richer people get to do, you know, that live in big cities.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I know it's so naïve but I was still in my early twenties, so there was a lot of learning going on. And then Artpace [San Antonio, Texas] came and that also made San Antonio more cosmopolitan where people from different cultures were understanding what I was doing because I kept trying to say my Botánica isn't – it's a sculpture. And they'd go, "Yeah, right," you know?

But finally, outside curators, like Maaretta Jaukkuri, at a museum in Finland, recognized my work. But I remember being jealous because Jesse was getting all the attention. And I'd keep saying like, well, do we have to make Joseph Beuys, white people art? Are we like monkeys? Like, oh look, this monkey can make Joseph Beuys looking art, you know – not calling Jesse a monkey but it gave me that feeling, like we'd only be rewarded to the extent that we can replicate the art of white, dominant culture.

MS. CORDOVA: In hindsight, how do you look at that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: In hindsight, I think I'm right. I mean, I think – for example, this is controversial but no one is going to read this for 50 years. I think Jesse's work fetishized white culture. I call Jesse a senti-minimalist because I put him in shows and I do respect his work. And it is minimalist and it is conceptual.

But it is also – there is a very Latino based sentimentality in it which is – and very sensitive and tender. So for that, I don't have problems with Jesse's work at all. I had problems where successful artists of Jesse's generation were being forced – not being forced but only being rewarded if they were producing "quality" work.

Quality became a very dangerous buzz word in the '80s which really meant no fags, no women, no blacks, you know? It really meant straight white manufactured, designed, detailed work. And I was fighting against that. That's why my work got sloppy. I wanted to say that something can be effortless and beautiful and valid. And Jesse, his generation, feared that in my generation.

One, we artists that were successful in my generation were gay, self-destructive, lazy, in the sense of we didn't want – and disorganized, in the sense that we didn't feel that things had to be measured and galvanized and manufactured; and rebellious against this constant macho pressure that had been put on us. So Jesse would often wag his fingers at me and my generation that we weren't going to make it if we don't start – just how I'm saying answer your damn phone calls, he was saying do work that doesn't fall apart in two seconds. So, you know, there's this generational mentoring going on.

And Jesse is a beloved regional artist. And now I am a successful artist of the national and now international community and I don't how good we're getting along right now. And we normally discuss this just when we're drunk. But we should discuss this later to see what happened and how and why, you know? So someday we are all going to talk about that.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, and you know, we can reserve that space.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Now how about getting connected with the Esperanza Center, right, because that was going on also. It was really starting, I guess it started in 1986 87 and you were part of the first, as I understand it, really the first outwardly gay show.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I guess it was, really. I bet it was.

MS. CORDOVA: It could have been. I'm not –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I know it was exciting. Whatever was going on was exciting. It was grassroots. It was low-budg. It was sexy. It was just fun. So it was a good time. And that's what seduced me. It's like, this is what I really am. I want to make art and be around other gay people and do rebellious things.

And it was a time of great optimism that we could change the world. And it was also very rasquache. So this fight I just talked about between the other generations and the other genders, you know, I was cocky in the sense that you can do sloppy work and it means something. It doesn't have to be always, you know, a production.

So you're right. So there was the Esperanza.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of work did you do for that show?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I had very angst-ridden – because I really thought I was going to die. I was sad. I wasn't sick, but I just presumed that it was my fate. So there was this neo-classical, gestural angst thing. It was like a triptych. I found objects and I painted these kind of allegorical figures of justice and – you know, I forget what the piece was called.

The second year, I got even more – by then, I was like really – like, the way I dress or the way I talk or the way I carry myself is pretty conformist in the sense that, you know, I shop at Banana Republic or GAP. You know when you see someone on the street that's really eccentric and like, God, I wish I could be that person? I can't be that way, but in my art, I can. I can be totally free, avant-garde, uninhibited and creative.

So I would do these weird pieces. One was, I think, pink cakes on a fountain with dried fish that I had just bought from Mexico. I don't know exactly what it meant. But it was just shocking and absurd and beautiful and easy and sexy and confusing and – not confusing just for the sake of being confusing but just beautiful, just shockingly beautiful and hybridized.

MS. CORDOVA: When did you start using food in your art?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I got a big huge studio after the Dave Hickey show, on Commerce Street called Patio Andaluz. It was an old dance hall from the 1920s, and I started using found objects and botánica objects and panadería objects. So I started using food then. And it was a show – one of my first Blue Star shows, and I used like this sausage that I stuck a diamond in, a real diamond that got stolen. I remember that. But it was insured. It was great.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] Oh, good.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Then food also was part of my mother's culture. There was dried and dehydrated food everywhere. And that was one of the premises that we didn't have Frida Kahlo altars but – and I think in working class Mexican American culture, all these cakes and baroque cookies – and this baroque, these remnants of the baroque usually one of the few things left is the cakes. If you go in a Mexican house, there would always be some kind of cakes or pastries and stuff that you can't really get into, or cakes under domes or – and to me those were altars.

If you go to my mother's house there's an extreme, she has mummified cakes and cookies and candies everywhere. And it's just so beautiful, so junky and depressing, like my republican brother won't even step into the house because it just smacks of poor Mexican lady. And I get tired of it after a while, but I kind of love it. I know I love it because it influences my art incredibly.

Mom would have sexy carrots. She'd have this carrot that she'd keep in the deep freeze and she'd bring it out once in a while. And it looked like the bottom torso of a woman. She'd have cupcakes that were dehydrated that had lasted for six or seven years and we weren't allowed to touch. So there were these sacred fetishes of the food.

MS. CORDOVA: Were they sort of mementos of special parties?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Probably mementos of special parties, yes. But just also preservation and life and, you know, they were baroque, just baroque ornamentation. They were just ornamentation also that would be around.

MS. CORDOVA: But what possessed you to put a diamond in a sausage?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think what I was doing then was unknowingly starting to start these extremes of hybridization. The diamond, I mean the sausage, was from a brand new H.E.B. store, not the Gucci B or not even Central Market. It was another experimental one called Fiesta Market or something like that.

And they had all these – like these 70 different types of sausages from Spain, 50 sausages – so it was real yuppie. So there was this sausage that was really tacky, actually shaped like a football, but it was just such a beautiful object. And when I cut in half, it made this beautiful pyramid.

And the diamond was like, my friend Danny Lozano was always hawking it for some reason. And so I just wanted to juxtapose mainstream and contemptuous objects with fabulous objects. I didn't realize what I was doing yet but I realized that I was asserting myself, my cultural mongrelism, my hybridity, my class hybridity.

And I wanted to do things very effortlessly. I wanted to do it lazy. I wanted to be cocky and have \$500 and buy a diamond and stick it in a sausage. And you know, because – I'm not picking on Jesse now, but I feel bad that I brought that up, but on all these straight boys that were telling me I am not doing things right. And it was cocky.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you find there were artists that you were gravitating to at some point?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was loath and afraid to read art magazines, and I had so much pent-up visual imagery and pain and sorrow and anxiety and political anger that I didn't need to draw on any sources. I just drew on what was in my immediate environment. Also, I was reacting. Don't forget, 10 hours a day, I'm having to be in this sterile, incredibly efficient corporate machine.

USAA is one of the most efficient companies in the world. So 10 hours a day – so, I would react with absurdity and I would look for just things that were just so unlike that. I was reacting against all of that. So it's not that I was being attracted to other artists. I was just being repulsed by other worlds that I had to spend the majority of my time in.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever feel like the law inspired your work in some way?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Not until later. Not until later when I was able to reflect on what I was doing and why and how. Although it was irrational, the law had given me the skills to articulate it to different groups of people. So that is what has helped me.

I am able to articulate what I'm doing to a museum curator, to an intellectual, as well as to a Mexican

grandmother, to a kid, to someone who doesn't like me, to someone who loves me, to someone who loves me but doesn't like my work. But those are skills I learned as a lawyer. I am going to use my verbal skills to try to persuade you to see my point of view on what I'm doing. That really helped me. So that legal skill did.

Also I loved my legal training in the sense that it taught me to address issues rationally, which also meant it allowed me to address taboos rationally, like when I'm saying, okay, Mexicans have this reputation for doing this and you know, that is a taboo based on stereotypes and all that. But there is also ways to look at it that would be fair and rational. And many, many times, I tried to address that way of thinking to why I am making art.

What is art? What is being a human being? What is culture? Constantly, that's all I think about. So that, my legal training goes to that.

The same energy that I would have used to negotiate a 600-page shopping center lease in Las Colinas Velas, now I can pour into making paintings of pandulces that I'm going to be selling next week. So I think the same energy level of thought go into these things.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about painting? Have you had any sort of professional training?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. My paintings actually are very bad. But fortunately, bad painting is in vogue right now. So it's really a good place. I also look at things from a - don't forget I come from - we are peddlers, you know, and I love selling things.

Painting has been great because I'm known for my sculptures but they are a hassle. They break. They're fragile. I have to buy materials. I have to store materials.

And that was a very Texas thing. Working with junk, that's easy in Texas. You have trucks. You have transportation. You have storage. You have tons of people with tons of stuff.

And living in New York, it was the opposite. Working with objects was a very, very extravagant delicacy because I didn't have much room. People buying my art was extravagant. For anyone to have wall space to own one of my paintings - I mean, not a painting but a three-dimensional sculpture; even a small one, they had money. Or to have a house that is somehow fancy enough that it can be kept clean. In New York, we get all that fine black dust so people are kind of scared of buying objects and stuff.

The sculptures were successful but they got in the way of my creativity because I have a decent gallery in New York. But they have to sell my work for at least \$1,000 to \$1,500 a unit for it to be worthwhile to them; both spiritually, because they don't want to deal with junk, and from a capitalist, they don't need the money but just for it to be worth it. I don't like that, because that means I can only sell work to a very, very small part of the population that likes my kind of work and is willing to spend a few thousands dollars for it.

So, you know, every year then, I can only produce like maybe 50 to 100 pieces that would sell. The rest, I have to worry about storing or destroying them or giving them away. I hated it.

So right now, painting has been great because I get this unlimited creativity and very, very inexpensive materials. And I get to create things. I don't have to wait. I can now create thousands of vignettes when I could only create a few hundred vignettes a year before.

MS. CORDOVA: Are you mostly working on small things?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Really small, cheap canvases and I am doing that on purpose. I am not trained as an artist but the paintings, I think, are charming. And I did a show a few months ago and that was the first time - I had been traveling non-stop for five years since the Whitney Biennial. So I just kept doing what I'm doing, what I'm doing, what I'm doing. And I am starting to fear that I was just doing it because it's expected of me. So I had this residency in North Carolina that was supposed to be three-months long. I hadn't been anywhere for three months, even New York, you know, consecutively. So I loved it.

Charlotte - it was in Charlotte. Charlotte is real corporate. I don't know if you know that. Bank of America and Wachovia is based there. So they pretty much bulldozed the city and built this brand new city with Dean & DeLuca and Starbucks and fruit stands and bookshops, this instant fake yuppie city.

But I liked it and the people were nice and the program was great. And they said I would - they said it was called the McColl Center for the Arts [McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, North Carolina]. And they said it was going to be really, really easy, no pressure, and it wasn't. They needed me to interface with the Latino community. Charlotte has the fastest growing Latino community by number in the United States.

So they got me involved and I did my job. I could have run for mayor. All the skills I learned as a lawyer. We did meetings. We did planning and the city is very organized and corporate.

I was working with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Hispanic this and Hispanic that. I turned my space into a gallery botánica that pretty much featured the art of 40 emerging Latino artists in the community. Some had already emerged.

So I mixed – and once again, I studied, like, what is a Latino community? A lot of it was expatriates from Central and South America. A lot of it is corporate people. A lot of it was waiters and stuff. But I did all my research and got all these people together and it was a great success.

The bottom line is that I wanted to still create. This was my chance. I was away from the critics. I was away from my collectors. And plus the people in Charlotte were very *nouveau riche* corporate people. They had like two hummers and three houses but they didn't know how to buy art.

So I beat them at their own game. I started making paintings for \$99, allowing them to, in a very non-threatening way, make artistic – they didn't know how to assert their taste. So for these \$99 paintings, they started buying five of them or 10 of them. So I would sell out. I had a show. I did 100 and I sold out in two hours.

So this is my new favorite spiel – is \$99 objects. So my new show at Marfa, I made this 800 square foot sculpture and I sold it by the square foot. And paintings, I sell for \$99 each and I finally, I think, have come to – that I'm not even dealing with Latino issues or class issues. I am just dealing now with broader issues of what art is all about, and what contemporary art is and what is its place in society. It has become just this elitist construct, maybe it always was. But as far as making a living on art, I want to do it in a more socialist way and this is going to be my formula.

I might lose my gallery. But right now, she is going to allow me to do a four-day show in New York. She is embarrassed about it but I'm going to sell 300 paintings for \$99 each. But anyway, you know, she was like embarrassed because this is a prestige gallery. But I said conceptually, this is what I want to do.

She said, "But Franco, most of our clients," – I go, yeah most of your present clients have already bought my work, the ones that are going to buy it. And if you have some rich clients that are embarrassed about spending \$99 for a piece – which I don't think they are, everyone in New York loves a bargain – they can buy 20 of them.

But I said, I also want my barber to buy a piece. I also want real people and my friends to buy pieces and maybe they are not the best paintings in the world. But most of them are worth \$99. And I'm doing the math. I can make \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year if I really wanted to and I'd be extremely happy.

I'd be extremely happy making \$20,000 a year. You know, there is no reason why art has to become this lofty experience that we have to depend on crumbs again. You know, that recurring theme of fighting over crumbs keeps raising its head, and I don't want to fight for crumbs anymore.

I want to just have this business that – it's very democratic and I make work that's very affordable, and worth my while and makes people happy, and I don't have to depend on the white elite to give my life meaning, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it's interesting. You have reached, I guess, a certain stage in your career when you can opt to go into the inflated art –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I could. It doesn't – am I being a Mexican and afraid of success? You know, is that the Mexican in me that wants to stay humble and you know, Sí, señor, buy my tamales for a dollar. You know, is it this Catholic fear of success or am I just onto something – I don't want to be rich. I've been rich before. I don't care.

The only reason I'd be rich is to build skyscrapers and make San Antonio beautiful. I really would. Maybe that's worthwhile. I want to enjoy my life. I want to create. I want to make art. I want to sell it. I want to have sex and have food and party and enjoy my friends and people I love and express myself and be a good person. And I don't really want to be rich.

If I watch television for a few days, then I think I'm a failure. I'm like, "Oh, J-Lo made \$600 million this year, I'm a failure." This is an epiphany that's happened in the last few months where I've really grown, that I don't want, I thought – I don't.

MS. CORDOVA: This is a complete switch from where you were in the 1980s, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Well, yes. I did it. I was at the best parties with the best people and, you know, they didn't work for it, most of them. They all inherited it. I not only was at the same place they were, I had to teach them. You know, I had to teach them "Mexican style" how to be rich.

You don't need money to be rich. It's a mentality. I had to teach them. You have guests, you offer them water.

You know what I mean. They had no clue. I'd have all these rich friends that were poor and starving. So not only did I get rich. It got to the point where I realized where I had come from really was rich. Does that make sense?

Then I wanted to prove that I was an artist and I was successful. And I guess, having a good gallery and all that was important. But now I just want to make a half-decent living from my art.

MS. CORDOVA: I loved hearing you talk about selling things. You learned to sell things in your parents' store.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: But what was the process or what are your memories of learning to sell?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, first of all, my dad was a horrible salesman. He talked too much and he thought too much. In this 1950s way, that men are, he was more into protecting people or teaching people stuff rather than selling, which is kind of good. So he wasn't like a soap salesman. But he'd be like, "I don't know if you want a microwave oven. They could cause sterilization."

And we'd be like, "Dad, why don't you go to the back, you don't want a satellite. They can give you cancer. Or you don't want your kid watching that much television." We'd be like, "Go. Computers are just a fad, you're going to buy a computer and then you're not going to - this is going to be a waste or it's going to be so obsolete in a few years. You should just wait a few years."

So my brother and I, we'd be like, "Go away." So we got him to just like play his violin all day and make garlic toast. And so, in a way he was very honest or too honest or just too alarmist. He was that 1950s alarmist type, product of that generation.

And I - for some reason, it's really still what I'm doing still in my sculptures - I created miniature utopias. And even when I was 8 years old, 9 years old, 10 years old, in charge of my stores, keeping them clean and displaying, I just imagined they were cities. And I had different districts for the cities, and the real expensive televisions were where the rich people lived. And then there were working class areas and there were - so it's in my DNA that I have always just been fascinated with class structure and integration and utopic and visions and cityscapes.

So really what I do is create these idealized gorgeous, I mean, I wish cities were like this, you know? I wish San Antonio hadn't been so sterilized. I wish you could go outside and there would be Mexican mercados streets, you know, mixed with everything else.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you learn skills for selling? What were your techniques or what -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I got that from my mother, a kind of a gypsy way of wanting - loving the cash, just loving the cash, touching it and counting it. I didn't even know what I wanted to do with it. And I think also I see selling something as someone accepting me. So I'm kind of whoring myself, but I'm a real inexpensive whore.

You know, if the metaphor for being an art - you know, I'd be the one charging a dollar in the back room, because that's really what I want to do. I want volume. So I do get a little high. You know, people buying my art, to me, turns me on. It rings a bell.

And when I had the little store in Boerne and all that, people buying things from our store turned me on, because it means we were going to eat better. It means we could afford better things and prettier clothes for my sisters and, you know, a car and improvement. We wouldn't have to live in a trailer. We could live in a nice house and we eventually got a tennis court and a swimming pool, a pool table, and braces.

You know, it meant something. And now all I want is enough money to use it to socially lubricate things. I mean I know what my needs are and my desires and my lusts. I need money for that but, in general, I try so hard to be spending a little bit of money in a way that makes a normal experience an extraordinary experience. Like if I have assistants, I'll take them to a restaurant that they've never dreamed of going to.

I believe in using money as creating education and societal progress and entrée. So that's what I still like to get money from. People can give me all the flattery they want or talk of - you know, if you really like it, spend \$99. You know, if not, let's talk later. But for now, I've got to make some sales because there is this big party I want to throw, and the big party is going to allow people to meet each other that normally wouldn't be meeting each other.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you remember the first work of art that you sold?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: That's a very good question. No, but I do remember the most important sale I made. Michael Tracy, who was one of my mentors, who is now one of my nemeses, but I forgive and forget. I really mean it. But

he was a very important – he would be an interesting person to interview because I might listen to what he says some day and just think, God, what a – but I think his perspective on what happened here is very important.

Michael Tracy was friends with Julian Schnabel. He was part of the bad boy generation of artists. He was outwardly gay, not very attractive. It was Henry Estrada's lover who got me this gig. H-e-n-r-y – [laughs] – and drenched in patchouli, and had a great habit of calling rich society ladies cunts and bitches and whores, and they couldn't spend enough money on his work because of that. It was horrifying but electrifying being around him.

I didn't know what was going on in the Judd World at the time. I just found out last week.

MS. CORDOVA: In the Judd World?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: You know, these men building their own empires. Have you been? It's obscene. Donald Judd is a dollhouse queen. You can quote me. Remember this historians: 100 years from now, dollhouse queen. Maybe he's straight but he was just like a builder of doll houses. That's a boy that didn't get to play with dolls, and finally got to and found the way to do it in a macho way. But building all those buildings and filling them up with little toy furniture, and a Bauhaus room and a Chinese room. Honey, it takes one to know one. That's a dollhouse queen.

Anyway, Michael Tracy is a dollhouse queen. So Michael Tracy was just legendary. He was gay and he was surrounded by handsome assistants and rich ladies that went to Marfa and Houston and Berlin and wore black. I mean, as I said many times, I wanted a piece of that. I charmed him and used my discretionary income to seduce him, not sexually, but he also would have – he'd also like me, I'm sure, sexually – and he stayed at my house. I threw a gorgeous party for him and I'd go to his house. Some of my art friends were part of his world, were his mentees. These art friends later became my peers but also peers that listened to my philosophy which I had learned more from the Rolando Briseño world.

So we'd go to Michael's house and be theatrical, you know, big huge candelabras just dripping wax, beds 30 feet by 10 feet and magenta curtains and gilded statues 30 feet tall in crumbling adobe buildings and thousands of dollars worth of the best cheeses and champagne in his subzero freezer. In the middle of the desert, amongst all the Mexican peasants, who were descendants of the aristocrats from the 18th century in San Ygnacio, this crumbling town now with baked carpet grass and giant satellite dishes, and the Mexicans who are no longer the right kind of Mexicans in his opinion.

He is the first person that bought my art work, that I recall. He bought this colorful series when I finally found my voice and I'd get this log and I'd cover this log in yellow incense and I found a deer head and stuffed oranges on its antlers and cover it in magenta. So it was a little bit influenced by him but it was also where I was too. I really worshipped him. Some of my smarter friends thought his work was very hokey. In hindsight, I think it is. Some series were very beautiful.

Even if it wasn't hokey, he was part of a generation that was a culture vulture, raping the culture. Coming from Iowa in 1960 and being a wannabe Mexican shaman, witchdoctor, voodoo, whoever and got all the rich white people to buy his work and got all the Mexican good-looking boys to do the work. Nothing wrong with that, I'm just as guilty. Maybe he has changed but what was so painful in that period is that he enabled us to a certain point, we Mexican boys, and as we became more independent, he seemed to pull the plug on us. There was a glass ceiling. We weren't allowed to meet his rich clients. We weren't good –

MS. CORDOVA: Just to be clear, you mean by just as guilty, that you were complicit just by your role?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was complicit and there is a little bit of colonizer in me too, you know? I used the Mexican boys to do the hard work. It's an easy trap to fall into. So that's why I want to be totally honest.

Yeah, I'm just as bad and I learned those habits. I can point my finger and boss Mexicans around just like the best of them. So I'm not going to be a hypocrite and say that's what's wrong with him.

What I felt was wrong with him though is that – not wrong, but was painful to my generation and an important growing lesson, is that there were people out there that venerated, once again, the form of my culture and despised those of us that no longer retained the form of that culture and considered us ignorant for that, but were unable to see the substance of that culture that was still in us. And when we spoke up about that substance, they would be so vehemently opposed to it and skeptical of it. Does that make sense to you yet, or shall I elaborate?

MS. CORDOVA: As someone who was looking at you too assimilated to even be of any culture.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Right. Exactly. Yes, exactly.

MS. CORDOVA: Which was something you were coping with as well.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, when he was the one that was acculturating to a culture that really didn't exist, some made-up Mexican fantasy Aztec-Oaxaca. It was a fantasy.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. He had an authentic identification that you couldn't possibly -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Exactly. Right. And all of his German friends and Swiss friends, and we were the mongrels and we were of use and we were physically beautiful, probably to him, some of us. And definitely he probably loved us and felt some patron-ship for - you know, very complicated. And the break was made.

I was selling his work at my botánica in the mid '90s and using best behavior, he respected me. I respected him. I sold his work and he liked me for that. But I was doing a lot of drugs, and I was cranky, and I was angry, and my head was big. We'd get in fights.

You know, the point was, is when I would start speaking to him, just as you'd speak up to your parents, to your uncles like, "Now listen, this is," you know. He goes, "Franco, I came to this fucking San Ygnacio and before I got here, kids were painting chickens with three legs." And I said, "Michael, that's exactly what I'm trying to tell you."

"You should thank God. You should get on the ground in one of your flowing magenta robes and thank God you came to a town where people paint chickens with three legs. That's real."

You know, so it was those kinds of fights. And after that, the line had been drawn. So I wish him the best. You might see us some day best friends.

But, boy, he was glamorous. That world was seductive and glamorous and gave us hope and did celebrate our culture. Do you know what I mean? Yes, there was a love hate there, because nobody else was celebrating it in that way and saying where we came from is something cosmic and extraordinary. But also something cosmic and extraordinary that he and his peers could benefit but people from my class were not allowed to.

MS. CORDOVA: It does become a very complicated subject, actually, and I think I remember something that you said, sort of about living the yuppie lifestyle that you list as a quote, I'm not quite sure from where, "I lived the Anglo life of a yuppie lawyer in a glass house bursting with Bauhaus design. I exoticized my own culture; I bought expensive Mexican objects and arranged installations of them in my home."

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. How do you know all that?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I sort of collect all the possible information that I can get.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Very good. Yes, I did. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And so then I was sort of thinking about -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And Michael would come to my house and love me like where did you come [from], you amazing creature? You know what I mean? I mean, that's what he thought. He's like, you're this 25-year-old boy and you're doing these, you know, how did you get to this point?

MS. CORDOVA: And so when did you feel like you weren't - are you still exoticizing it, I guess, becomes the question?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I'm just weaning myself from that. Yes. I'm now, I hope, at a point of - you want to finish your question. Did I interrupt you?

MS. CORDOVA: No, I mean, I think it's just a very complex issue.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I am no longer exoticizing it. First of all, the world is changing so fast that all these things that I loved, even in the last 15 years, the people that loved it are dying or are gone. You go back to Mexico City and everything is plastic and from Japan now. I'm older, I got ill, my life could end tomorrow, my life could end 50 years from now, I don't know.

Exoticization is a toy and a luxury that no longer interests me. So where am I right now? I have reached the point where the more things are different, I realize, the more things are really the same. And people are the same, people want what they don't have. Rich people want what poor people have, poor people want what rich people have. And so I don't think it's about exoticization any more.

It's not even about beauty or even - I'm going through a time of purging and I hope of growth. So my art, I think

the word I'm still seeking now is not exoticization, but a utopic vision. Utopic – I'm craving mixtures of order and chaos, of beauty and – not ugliness; I don't know. Of order and chaos, of this utopic vision, of the sacred and the profane, of the simple and the complex. Of the sublime and of the mundane.

That's the only thing that still drives me. Like that installation I just did in Marfa, I purged all the objects, I've just purged myself of all the five years of collecting that I've done, where I've gone from being very, very ill and twice I almost died and had not even any white cells left, much less money, or anything. And surviving that and accumulating these objects one more time, and then doing one more show, and one more display of a utopic view.

Now, now I need to grow even more. Is this ego? Am I being just as bad as Donald Judd or Michael Tracy, or am I just being the same as any other human that wants control over their environment? I mean, am I just trying to create a vision of how I'd like the world to be? And if so, can I forgive myself for that? And if so, is my vision better than some other people's visions that are being venerated and maybe shouldn't be so much?

For example, Donald Judd, he's so venerated, and I look at his utopia and there's no place for me and my people, except to sweep his floors and cook his beans, you know? That's what I saw.

MS. CORDOVA: And yet you still, as we mentioned even before the taping, you found his work inspiring in some ways?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, for two – one, in a misinformed way. Misinformed is that I just presumed that modern people – that smart people and privileged people were not rednecks, and I was going to be safe and I was going to be allowed to be fabulous, and I was right. I've had a fabulous life, full of champagne and air conditioning and rich people's houses and social acceptance, so my hunch was right, I guess.

But I was misinformed that the world was going to get better and better, that things were just going to get better and better and better, and there was going to be this cosmo – no, maybe it did happen. Maybe it is happening right now. The Smithsonian [Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.] cares what I think? You know what I mean? You know?

[Laughter.]

Maybe it did happen. I don't – maybe it did and it just happened so fast I haven't even realized it yet. So I think I'm still an optimist, I just want to fill up these empty parking lots in San Antonio. Then I'll know something happened. No, it's just – I still feel more utopic. I still want the heat turned up a bit. I want a bigger pie and I want more people allowed to share it.

MS. CORDOVA: That is a great – now, I'm seeing that we're at the end of this disc. Should we stop for now, or can we continue for a little bit?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: We can do whatever you want. Do you think you need more information from me?

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, well, I'm going to stop this –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: There's more.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: All right.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, Franco, we haven't even started yet. Let me at least stop this tape.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: Right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Franco Mondini-Ruiz at Sala Diaz on July 8, 2004. And this is Session Two and Disc One.

And, Franco, how about I start us off with when did you finally decide to give up law?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay. Simultaneous with my new life, when I came out of the closet and I was in the social swirl of what was going on in San Antonio. The gay scene was very arty and I just was very seduced by it. It was very artistic and creative and aesthetically beautiful and politically pertinent. I loved it.

And sexy, it was just irresistible. And I knew I wanted a life like that. I wanted to live like my friends, who were free, that didn't have to get up at seven in the morning, didn't have to work in offices.

I think about - I've had two jobs as a lawyer, I worked for a prestigious law firm and then I got a very easy, cushy job at a company called USAA, based here in San Antonio. And although the job was very easy, I hated it. I was on the phone half the time. And I was able to get all of my work done all the time, but I was just going through the motions, and I could have done a better job. It just wasn't where my heart was.

And I just wanted to be free. I just thought my whole life was going to go by and I was doing things I didn't want to do with the majority of my time, only to support my material wealth, only to keep up my car payments and my credit card payments and my house mortgage, which afforded me prestige and luxury, but it wasn't worth it to me. And I was miserable.

Miserable, and at the same time thrilled at having this lifestyle, and got a lot of perks. It was very prestigious to be a lawyer in those days and live in a rich neighborhood. But the call to be an artist and to be free of the obligations of having to work a job just became overwhelming. So I would have quit being a lawyer much earlier than I did, but for the fact that the real estate market in San Antonio had plummeted.

So the house I paid for was actually valued at less than what I had paid for it for many years. So I had to wait about another five years - the real estate market in Texas recovered and could pay off all my bills. So about - I don't even know the year now. Maybe 10 years ago, in the mid to early 90s, I finally took the plunge and quit.

I had \$60,000 in my retirement fund. I could sell my house at a profit, so I took care of - sold everything and was liquid. I had money, you know, and I didn't work with it wisely. It got heavily taxed and disappeared very, very quickly. But I was free, but I didn't have a house anymore. I joined the more bohemian community in the south part of San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Where was that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Which is actually kind of where we're sitting. I lived in the house next door. Mike Casey is an attorney, a very colorful character here in San Antonio, and he's kind of the godfather of all the artist community. He takes care of us. He owns a lot of houses that are very rustic and in different stages of dilapidation, some are show places, some are very simple. You know, like, this house that we live in, we insist he does not paint it because we like the patina on the house.

So many, many artists in the San Antonio community have lived in houses owned by him. So here I am now living in San Antonio with a \$200 or \$300 rent a month. And all of my treasures that I had accumulated in my lawyer days, although my house was minimalist, somehow I still had accumulated a lot of Mexican retablos and colonial paintings and sculptures and such.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you end up purchasing the botánica?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, after I quit being a lawyer I had a lucky break and I got my first NFRIG grant, New Forms Regional Initiative Grant. As a matter of fact, I was still a lawyer, and I felt a little weird, because here I was with a high income but also getting a grant. But I needed to get grants to get some credibility and affirmation. When I quit being a lawyer, I kind of threw a nervous breakdown, just a funk.

I was so used to always having every minute of my day taken and art being this great luxury, making art, that when I had time to do it all day long, you know, it's just like when people retire, they go through shock. So I went through a year of shock. And then I did what boys of my type were doing, artsy boys if they could, and I moved to Mexico City.

And that was very interesting. I had lots of money in my pocket, and I experienced something unusual, and for the fact that - I'm getting to the answer of the botánica is that okay?

MS. CORDOVA: No, that's fine, take your time.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: In Mexico, you and I would be called pochos. We are - we are Americanized Mexican Americans, most of us - maybe not in your case, but can't even speak Spanish. So we're not quite Americans, we're not quite Mexicans. We're pretty much the lowest rung in society in Mexican culture.

Now, I got to be a privileged pocho. I have an Italian surname, I look European, I was a lawyer, you know. I was in the gay circle, so I did not feel any of the stigma of being treated like a middle-class Mexican American might be treated, to a certain extent.

When I went to Mexico City, I still had this blind ambition and just drive, and I thought, you know, I'm going to go to Mexico and I'm going to be taken in immediately. And in some circles I was. I met very interesting people.

I went through my falling in love with Mexican boys period, the high, high class ones. It was very exhilarating. So now I was a rich – I was in the Mexican intellectual, arty, jet set. And not the cheesy types of Mexicans, the type that shopped in London and wore, you know, British clothes and –

MS. CORDOVA: Very cosmopolitan.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Very cosmopolitan. They could have been from anywhere in the world. And I was star struck. They all turned out to be assholes. They're all my friends still, but, you know, but I learned that I was not a Mexican. And I would be a part of the art scene and it wasn't much different from San Antonio. It was all blonde people. It was all German surnamed people. It was Americans that were showing, you know, in the shows. And there'd be maybe one token brown person in a whole group, in a whole museum opening it was all expatriates, being very cool and groovy and slumming it in Europe.

And many of them have become famous artists and many of them are my friends. But, it was white. And the only brown skinned people, once again, were serving the cocktails. So things – I was shocked, as things had not changed. Even in Mexico City it might as well have been an art opening in Dallas or Seattle.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you deal with the language?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, I never had to speak Spanish, in this socioeconomic circle everyone spoke better English than I did. Yeah, language was never a problem. This was the international group. Middle class. I wouldn't say the jet set. When I say jet set, this was more the very, very small, middle-to-upper-middle-class, gay, educated, artsy group.

I won the people over. First of all, I celebrated my 30th birthday in Mexico City. I wanted so much to educate the United States, or my friends in the U.S., that I come from somewhere spectacular. So at my 30th birthday about 50 or 60 of my friends from San Antonio came. We were living – Drew Allen, who died, was one of the co-owners of Liberty Bar, had opened up his house in the Plaza Santa Caterina, which is about two plazas from the main Zocalo.

It was an 18th century grand home that had now been subdivided. It was this impeccable taste that Drew and a lot of my friends shared. It was rustic, hyper-overly romanticized with a tinge of colonialism, but drop dead gorgeous, you know? Antique, you know, Oaxacan pots and chandeliers, and, you know, it's a fantasy. And so we were effete Americans living this fantasy in Mexico City.

At that time people weren't yet living in Mexico City at the time. I befriended some other expatriates; many of them have become famous artists now; all white, all European, all privileged, all well intended and loving Mexico. But they were part of the expatriate groovy art crowd there. They kind of took me in, but I was still a nerdy, yuppyish lawyer, that probably came across as a crass Texan trying to buy my way into being taken seriously as an artist.

At least that's the insecurity that I had felt. And I was snubbed a lot. There were shows that people that I thought were my friends would have, and it'd be like "New Directions in Gay Mexican Latinos," and I would not be asked to be in the show. Even though some of these friends I threw shows for in San Antonio. There would be straight, white men and women from Europe and the United States put in this show.

But once again none of us gay Mexican Americans who were making good art were allowed to be in this show. I'm still freaked out about it, and I still to this day have not been shown in Mexico. My white friends, who probably speak Spanish better than me, who work with Mexican imagery, have all prospered in Mexico. There is some kind of freaky thing going on where Mexican Americans, we would be the last people to show in Mexico.

MS. CORDOVA: But I – now, there was something, though, in Mexico City, it was in the Plaza Santa –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I turned my sorrow and my shock into a very good piece that would really set the direction of my life. I realized I was not a Mexican and I was not an American, or maybe I was very American. As I looked over the gorgeous Plaza Santa Caterina, my gay friends and I, Mexican Americans, we said, oh, wouldn't it be great if we just cleaned this place up? We queer eyed the plaza.

So one night, in all my sorrow I, alone, arranged all the garbage in a grid of thousands of squares, following each little block of the plaza. Pumpkin seeds and corn cobs and dirty diapers and lost shoes and trash and Pepsi bottles and half eaten oranges, and it became this gorgeous, gorgeous sparkling piece ["Naturaleza Muerta," 1995, Mexico City, Mexico]. It looked like Venice. No one disturbed me while I was making that piece, I will always love Mexico for that.

No cops said, "You can't do that," or people said, "What are you doing?" You know, lovers would be in the park and gingerly enjoy – walk around my piece and enjoy it. And the next morning – I had it documented and, well, I

spent \$300 on having it photographed correctly. And I kind of wanted to do it to show this person that didn't put me in this art show how wrong they were to exclude me, and how worthy I was, or at least I thought I was. But no one had yet affirmed me.

And the piece was beautiful, and a few hours later when the sun rose it got swept away. But it is the first gridded piece that I had done, and it worked in the sense that, one, it represented once again this dichotomy I have between the American and modernism, and the European with its order and classicism, and the baroque and the chaos of my Mexican culture.

MS. CORDOVA: So maybe that's where the grid has taken off, from there, from that point on?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Probably.

MS. CORDOVA: Because you've used that repeatedly.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Repeatedly. It was once again this utopic culture that I would have a place in. Because still I was without a place. I had gone to Mexico, I had bragged about Mexico. Maybe I was cocky thinking that I could just, you know, I was thinking very colonially. I'll come to Mexico and I'll be instantly accepted. And maybe if I was white and blonde I would have been.

I was not rejected by any stretch of the imagination. I was treated like a prince, and I was allowed in high circles. But still, once again, I was not being taken seriously as an artist. But in hindsight, of course I wasn't. I was still seen as a corporate lawyer splashing around his money. I hadn't paid my dues yet. But I was hungry and impatient, and once again with AIDS looming in the world I just thought I had no time, I was fast - I was working fast and desperately.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you remember when AIDS first entered your consciousness?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think - was it early 80s or late 70s? Early 80s.

MS. CORDOVA: 1980 I think is when it was first -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, I'm just out of high school, just out of high school, where they don't know what's causing it. And there was that news story after news story where it's affecting -

MS. CORDOVA: Grids.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: What?

MS. CORDOVA: It was grids right? It was -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was grid. Oh my God.

MS. CORDOVA: Gay-related immune deficiency syndrome.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, that's right, yes. And for some reason Haitians were getting it.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: You know, these weird things. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: That's weird.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So it didn't hit San Antonio too much until much later. You know, it was a thing that happened to San Francisco people and New York people. I was still a virgin, I think, for many years during the AIDS crisis. And not out of fear of AIDS, just out of fear of living and being alive. I wasn't ready yet, because I wanted to accomplish things.

MS. CORDOVA: So, you were very conscious of AIDS before you'd even come out?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh my God, of course. But it hadn't hit San Antonio much. It was still very abstract. It was something that happened in the big cities, and everyone just believed it wouldn't happen. You know, you just don't believe it would happen to you. How could it happen to me? I'm a well educated lawyer, you know? But it didn't happen - I remember when I applied for my job at USAA they needed a physical.

So I didn't want to go to my physical and find out I have AIDS there, so I went to a doctor, because I'd had some sex by then, and I tested negative. But, you know, it was that first terrifying journey that I had gone through in that direction. Later on, ironically, my doctor did die of AIDS. Yeah, so a lot of people died. After a while, like I

say, the elite died, the doctors, the business – many business owners. The most beautiful of the men.

MS. CORDOVA: So it sort of reached San Antonio in the late '80s?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Second tier cities like ourselves, yeah, it didn't become noticeable until quite a bit later. So I did this grid piece, I documented it well, and that was that. Later on, Tracey Moffat, who visited me during the Artpace thing [1996 Artpace Artist in Residence program], a residency, came to my kitchen and saw those slides. She remembers there were just like – you know, piles of slides in bowls, and she saw them. And she doesn't like installation art but she was flabbergasted by that piece, she just said it was gorgeous.

And so I was starting to get – the work that I had done was starting to be affirmed. So I did my Mexico City thing. I ran pretty low on money. I was a playboy, you know. I was always buying everybody drinks and trying to win everybody over, and just very, very happy. One thing I did in Mexico City, that 30th birthday I had was a glamorous event. People like Peter Gonzales Falcon, one of my friends, came.

He was the first international Chicano film star, he played Fellini in Fellini's *Roma*. Sandra Cisneros came. As my gift she wrote a poem for me, which –

MS. CORDOVA: I wanted to ask you about that poem.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Which was later published in *The New Yorker*, and her book, *Loose Women*, and will be considered the forward in my new upcoming book, *High Pink. Still Life with Horses, Rhinestones*. Yeah. Those were glamorous days, where we were very self-indulgent and misbehaving and really fucking with people. We were glamorous, young, successful Mexican Americans.

MS. CORDOVA: Is there any special meaning that I should take out of that poem or anything that you especially take away from that poem?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: One thing is that that's not maybe – it was very prophetic, for starters. It was prophetic. It represents a Sandra Cisneros that no longer exists. It was a place in time in our youth, it was cocky, it was necessary at the time. It represents – we were living on the edge. This was Paris in the '20s. Everyone laughs at that, but it was. I mean, it was – it was sex and champagne and beauty and art and money and success and intellectual pursuits and making a difference.

MS. CORDOVA: And transnational.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And it was transnational. It was great, but it was cocky. And we were cocky, and we were thrown out of bars, you know.

[Laughs.]

We lived like millionaires, that was the expression. Danny Lozano gets credit for saying, we lived like millionaires. But between you and me, I invented that term. I really did.

[Laughter.]

Danny Lozano –

MS. CORDOVA: Just between you and me.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Exactly. Danny Lozano was fabulous, though.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did that term – how did that term sort of gain credibility?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Because it was so funny, because we were at Danny's house – once again, Danny did Tienda Guadalupe.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But, you know, it was the white guys that were aspiring to the Arte Folkloric and all that, and trips to Oaxaca. Danny was aspiring in his – when he was probably my age, to Lalique crystal and linens and Blackamoors, and, you know all this richy, white stuff. So Danny's house was extravagant. You know, Baccarat crystals. Later on it got mixed with Mexican folk art and all that as he evolved.

So we loved playing with the notion of high and low, because we were all successful and quasi-glamorous in our little pond, we were the big fish in this little pond. And we had dinners and we'd get fried chicken from Church's, but we'd eat it with forks, a foot long, weighing two pounds of pure silver, you know, and crystal champagne

flutes two feet high. And we used to joke, “We live like millionaires.”

And it was just – it was a unique expression of how we were living, where we were still aware of where we came from, where our parents would buy a box of fried chicken for dinner, you know, which I didn’t know was low class, you know, but none of us did. We thought that was a treat. So we’d eat Church’s fried chicken with thousands of dollars worth of silverware, and we used to say we lived like millionaires.

And we’d sing opera, we wore costumes. We lived like rock stars. And we were doing something worthwhile and exciting that no one had done yet.

MS. CORDOVA: About when would you say this time period was?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: This now is from Sandra’s quinceañera, when she turned 40, about –

MS. CORDOVA: A quinceañera when she turned 40?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, it was a cinquantañera, it was a – she had a quinceañera when she was 40 because she’d never had one.

[Laughter.]

So I through this extravagant one for her at my house, that’s when I won her over. It was at my house in – anyway, we decorated the house, we had gigantic cakes with dolls stuck in them. Everything was decorated in silver and pink. I remember some real snooty New Yorkers visited and one of the friends said, “This is cooler than anything in New York.”

And I didn’t know, I was just following my instincts. I didn’t get this out of a magazine or anything, it was just vernacular and cool. So I was getting so much reinforcement, I knew what I was doing was right. And that led to all these parties I would throw, what I used to call glamour parties. And they were art. They were art. People would come in costumes and –

MS. CORDOVA: What were some of the themes that you –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was never a theme, it was just a party and I wanted everyone to look glamorous. And I’d have gigantic gilded mirrors with cocaine and beautiful food and old ladies dressed in, you know, vintage Valentino and gay hairdressers and transvestites and society people and rich liberals and rich – you know, I told you. I’ve described all of that.

And chickens. Exotic chickens.

MS. CORDOVA: So when did you come back from Mexico or what made that decision?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I –

MS. CORDOVA: You were planning to live there, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I’m not sure. It’s a little foggy, what I was going to do. All I remember is my friends remember I went to Mexico and I left my air conditioner on. And their air conditioner didn’t work, so I was gone for three months with my AC on, and they were next door sweltering. That’s kind of how I was in those days.

And I came back and got sick. I ate a hamburger when I got home and I felt funky and everyone – and it was fiesta. And I really thought I had drunk some punch with acid in it or something, and maybe I even had. And I remember I was dating this boy that was really cute, and I smoked a lot of pot. I never had really smoked pot before that much, so I don’t know what was going on. I thought it was just a bug I picked up from Mexico.

And in about two or three days I was delirious and foaming at the mouth and dehydrated and naked. And my brain was doing this weird thing where I was thinking of multiples of numbers uncontrollably. I would think two, four, eight, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, and my brain could focus up into the billions of doubling numbers. I don’t know what that meant. Probably was some kind of brain fungus or spot on my brain.

So I had – I was sick, I got sick. And my mother thought it was a drug overdose and she called the police, and it was just – she made it worse. She didn’t mean to, but it was a horrible time and I was naked and covered in dried saliva down to my chest, and I had about 30 minutes to live, they think. And that was the first hospitalization. And the joke – the joke coming out was I said, maybe it’s from all this trash I picked up in the plaza. You know, like I say, I was handling dirty diapers and stuff.

And Sandra, you know, once said, “I don’t think it was that kind of trash that he picked up. That’s not what made

him sick.” So I was hospitalized for the first time, they didn’t know what it was. And the doctor said, it was the best doctor in town, and he said, congratulations, you’re negative. It’s not AIDS. We don’t know what it is. And there was all these weird new fungi developing and stuck people.

You know, so they were really concerned that it was some kind of new disease I had. He came back a few hours later and said, I am so sorry, I made a mistake. This is a new test we’ve done and I read it wrong, you are a positive. And he says, you just got it. He says, it just has registered. So I got this virulent – how do you spell that? How do you pronounce it? Virulent, virulent?

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, virulent?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Virulent. Yeah, this virulent strain of HIV. And, I mean, it almost killed me in a few hours. You know, he said, you didn’t have it a week ago, I mean, it hadn’t manifested enough antibodies to show yet. So I think it was just a physical, spiritual, mental breakdown in every way, which may have even manifested itself in HIV. I had come full circle, it was a death and a life.

So then I recovered –

MS. CORDOVA: That would have been about 1995 or ‘96, wouldn’t it?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, yeah.

So I recovered and they put me on AZT, and I read the instructions wrong. I was taking, like, triple doses or something, and it made me so sick. So I didn’t take medicine. I kind of acted in denial that I even had it, because I didn’t have a cold for five years, I had a tan. Even when I was in the hospital the first time, I had been at the tanning salon and stuff, I looked great. I looked tanned and healthy, and then, you know, my bloating went down, and so it was okay.

And so I get out of the hospital and I play a really bad trick, because I got kind of partial amnesia. And I ran into one of my friends Ito, and I saw one of Mark’s shows and I said “Hi, my name’s Franco” to Ito – you know, I did that joke to two people, and one of them – they both started crying. I shouldn’t have done it.

MS. CORDOVA: Just because you were –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was just so shocking, you know, and I had forgotten everything.

MS. CORDOVA: – forgotten everyone.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. So after that, I saw my life, you know, after that the pressure of fear of AIDS was over. You know, I got it, so now what?

MS. CORDOVA: How did you feel at that moment? I mean, it’s almost as if you were living this life knowing that you would get it and then you finally got it.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I felt – I think only until recently have I really gotten over it. You know, I get these blackout drunken states and feel sorry for myself and get angry, and I think the anger was that. So, I guess I’ve been mourning for the last 10 years and not realizing it. I really don’t feel that sad place anymore. It finally, finally passed.

I think I just worked my way out of it. So I go back home and I decide to open the most beautiful store in the world. So I guess I’m returning to my childhood again. And so south of downtown there’s a dilapidated, gorgeous old Mexican botánica that looks like what my utopic vision of San Antonio would have been, fluttered and Mexican and fascinating, you know, not all sterilized.

And a friend of mine at the time, Brent Widen, had this Yankee ingenuity. He’s Jewish and he’s from up north and he’s an artist and he’s manic depressive. But he had this gumption that we locals didn’t have. He bought all the buildings on his credit card. You know, I could have done that but I didn’t think in those terms, so I’ll always admire him for that.

He had already gotten some Mexican family to take over the botánica, but I did play my –our card, which was a tough decision, but I said, “Can you get them out of there and get me in there?” Because they were doing what real Mexicans do. What I want to do is what fake Mexicans do. They were taking all the old stuff out of the gorgeous old packages and putting them in new, hideous fluorescent packages. You know what I mean?

MS. CORDOVA: I do.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So there was like 1940s, 50s, 70s packages, and they were gutting everything. So –

MS. CORDOVA: Modernizing.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They were modernizing it. And, you know, that's what real Mexicans of that class would strive for. But I wanted this hyper romanticized version, and I won, and I did play my card, so, you know, I'm not totally innocent about all that. But I settled with them, I even paid them money and they were fine with it.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you grown up with the botánica? Did you use one, or your family?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes and no. My mother had some botánica magic objects such as piedra de iman, which is the magic lodestone that she would keep in a sucret's box and hide it under her underwear draw from my father, who forbade all of that ignorant hocus pocus in the house.

My mother would give us healing rituals, not with the egg and all that, but she would lay hands on us. And there was a lot of animism and gypsyism and lots of folklore in her. You know, she's very much – she has all of that mentality in her. It turned out later, she decided to finally tell me, that my ancestors were curanderos and santeros on both sides of the family.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. It was just something that never dawned on her to tell me, even though I opened a botánica. And –

MS. CORDOVA: When did you find this out?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: A couple of years later, you know, a year after that. She goes, well, you know your great grandfather was a curandero, a faith healer. I don't think she's proud of that because once again my mother was conflicted. Part of her wanted to be a white 1950s lady, you know? And part of her now was seeing that her son, and her son's generation, were venerating and celebrating things that she was embarrassed to talk about.

Which, you know, there were – there are Mexicans in San Antonio that would be proud of all of that. But my mother was of that ilk where they were very ambivalent and conflicted, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: But there's a lot to learn when opening a botánica, I think.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There was.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, you must have had, like, again, this new education.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, the main thing I cared about was to just make it beautiful. And at first I used all the medicines and stuff just as décor. And some of the decorations I was doing just these absurd juxtapositions of objects, santeros and curanderos would come in and say, these have specific meanings, which I didn't know.

I don't know if this – maybe it's just coincidence, but it was an amazing coincidence. Later on I would have Mexican women working for me who educated me about the proper herbs needed for different things. A lot of times guys were just looking for Spanish flies, you know, roofies or a lot of times – it must be an unspoken phenomenon but a lot of times it was, like, men from Mexico that probably were closeted and gay, and it was understood that a botánica was kind of a gender bender kind of thing.

And I often messed around, safely, but messed around with a lot of customers that you'd never know were gay. They wanted a limpia, which I didn't – you know, they wanted me to get them naked, you know? And some of them I think were sincere, that they wanted some kind of spiritual cleansing, but I think – I know in many cases it was an excuse for homoerotic contact. I know that now.

MS. CORDOVA: But you didn't know that opening the store?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Of course not, no. But the store was definitely fascinating. You know, there was virgins of Guadalupe and skeletons. And it was based in homage to Drew, who had just died, and Danny Lozano, who had just died, and a guy named – oh, I just forgot his name, but this beautiful, beautiful light-skinned, blue-eyed Mexican guy. They influenced my aesthetic. It was this baroque overload.

And kind of like Chuck's house. You know, if you look at Chuck's house, imagine it 20 times more crowded in a crumbling building and also with Chanel dresses and pre-Colombian sculptures and, you know, Prada shoes that had only been worn once, and candy and fresh cookies and my mother making sandwiches and beautiful Mexican boys, gangsters working for me, and chandeliers and rococo furniture. Early Texana furniture from the 16th, 17th century – 17th century.

Beautiful colonial paintings piled up to the ceiling, it was – and then contemporary work and conceptual work

and Jesse Amado pieces. On a good day it was a masterpiece. On a bad day it could easily become *Sanford and Son*, you know. It really could. It was a lot of work and I was constantly arranging and cleaning up the store.

I also had parties to make money and used to – whenever a reception was needed or something, it became a public space.

MS. CORDOVA: Would a reception be for a specific artist?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, let's say it's Coco Fusco's birthday, and she happens to be in town. So I get on the phone and 500 to 600 people would show up. We'd do the food upstairs at Chuck's, and then I would sell things downstairs. So usually the parties paid for themselves and often I made a profit, and it was just the thing to do. And, I mean, we weren't copying Austin, we weren't copying Houston or Dallas or New York, this was unique and great.

And because of Artpace, people from all over the world were seeing it. And it was like being in a very, very well art directed Fellini movie. And I had, you know, the richest girls in town sweeping the floor. I'm serious. You know, and helping me wrap packages and stuff like that. There was a lot of social mixing going on.

MS. CORDOVA: I think I've heard a couple of descriptions of the botánica, and one that struck me was, "Its camped up aspects were unmistakably queer."

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Perhaps. Yes, I think so, but it was queer. It was like queers with – like Chuck. It was visceral. It was queer, yeah. There was definitely a gay stamp on it, but it wasn't a gay store. You know, there wasn't rainbow stickers and – you know, things like that. It was cultured art fag, you know, mixed with bohemian gay, mixed with artist. It was queer and diverse, it was tolerant also.

It was tolerant and it was – have you ever seen pictures of it? There's not many. I didn't document it much at all.

MS. CORDOVA: I've only seen one of the exterior.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, no, it was just so beautiful inside. It was beautiful.

MS. CORDOVA: How would you conduct business? Like, what was – how would you sell things? Or what was the process?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, at – it was extraordinary. Have you ever been to Takashimaya in New York?

MS. CORDOVA: No.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Everyone brags how beautiful Takashimaya's garden area is. It blew Takashimaya away. I would have, like, maybe a pile of watermelons, and on top of those watermelons were probably \$30,000 worth of silver necklaces with pre-Columbian beads that some old art lady was just sick of, and, you know, sold to me, traded for something else and probably sold those necklaces for \$100, probably worth \$2,000. And they would just be all piled up on top of a pile of watermelons.

You know, shocking. The store was shocking. And before long all the gypsies and the pickers knew about my store. So queers, all the queers – and half of them were dying of AIDS and needed money, were selling me all their stuff. So it became a repository of all the gays who were dying, you know, who had –

MS. CORDOVA: That's amazing.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: – who were selling all their lifetime collections of things. And maybe an artist, a woman artist, you know, becomes a born again Christian and gets rid of all her Buddhas she had collected over the last 50 years. Just bizarre things. It became a trading post for artists. And because of the AIDS crisis it really became a repository, a clearing house for the best stuff in the city.

Almost any house you go to, like this, probably 10 to 20 percent of the stuff in this house is from my store. And every interesting house in San Antonio. And it came from someone else's house who probably died.

MS. CORDOVA: So, yeah, I mean, were –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So it was a public service in a way, too. Because I was paying fair prices, but, you know, people – I remember with their last breath they were still finding things for me. And that's why the store had so much soul. It was just a gigantic altar. It was an altar.

[Phone rings.]

Sorry.

MS. CORDOVA: Go ahead, we're recording.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Now, it wasn't all dying vendors, but it was all kinds of - it was the pickers and the gypsies and the vendors, and it was magic. And I just got incredible collections of stuff. So everyone would unload their stuff at my place.

MS. CORDOVA: Were a lot of gay men just compelled to sell their things, just to pay the hospital bills or that kind of thing?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They knew they were dying, and they -

MS. CORDOVA: They were just clearing house.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They were clearing house, yeah. They were preparing themselves for that. I mean, it didn't happen all the time, but I know many, many instances where I ended up with, you know, the estates of people who were sick or dying. As well as people who just wanted to get rid of their crap. As well as - a new market was created, that became guys that were just in charge of finding things for me.

It also got out of hand to the point where now people were robbing graves and stealing things from Mexican ladies' yards. Especially in Austin. There was one guy that would bring an 18 wheeler and, you know, beg, borrow, maybe buy, and steal just anything of interest that was in Mexican people's yards. So it became en vogue, you know, all the stuff that was reviled, tire planters and chip pot planters and statues and all that was considered Mexican junk now was fancied by rich Austinites, and it'd be stolen by the truckload.

[END TAPE 2, BEGIN TAPE 3]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: The store went well. Some days I'd make as much as \$10,000 a day. There was a magazine or a newspaper at my store almost every day, or a celebrity or famous artist. I was very happy. I was thin and busy and eating tacos and kissing boys. I could have died. I was self-actualized and I had done what I wanted to do. I wanted to make San Antonio the coolest place in the world. Now, was that ego or was that just my love for San Antonio, or both? I don't know, but I did it.

Did I maintain it? No. I got druggo. You know, one of the things about it, as a gay haven, it became also a drug haven. Thank, God, we never got busted or anything, you know? But I think there were undercover people starting to survey the place. There'd be like these straight, weird guys that - not weird, but just, I don't understand why they were there. They kept saying, "Hey, you want to party? I have some beers and -"

MS. CORDOVA: Very straight -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Was I supposed to say, yeah, I have pot? I mean, it looked like a head shop, but it wasn't, you know. It really wasn't. But there was a lot of cocaine going on. And one of my best friends was a very glamorous coke dealer who brought me a lot of good business. He's very respectable. If you went to his house, it was a beautiful - you know, we were just decadent, effete, homosexual men. He died. He didn't make it.

And the drug dealers would come to my store like at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, we'd have a party. I'd open up and I'd sell like \$10,000 worth of gorgeous paintings. So it turned out that all these Mexican drug dealers and white drug dealers had some of the best collections in town that would blow Joe Diaz's collection - the guy that just called me, blow his collection away, you know? It's probably all rotted in a garage, you know, but they were buying good art.

MS. CORDOVA: What a curious situation to be in a place where, you're again, you're creating altars, you're dealing with death, and you're in a place that's a site of viewing, but, you know, there are drugs on site.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, drugs were medicine. They were self-medication, you know? You didn't hurt anymore when you did drugs, and it was ritual and it was splendor. And it was just fucking cocaine. You know, kids used to drink it at the soda shops, you know. And that place was a soda shop. That place used to sell cocaine. It was a big, popular coke shop in the '30s. And everybody used to get their sodas there. And, you know, the only reason you did - soda fountains were cocaine dispensaries. You know that, right?

You know, so nothing changed. It was just coke was illegal now. And it was only illegal because they were afraid the Mexicans and the blacks were going to rape white women, if they did too much of it. Fuck all that.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you hear a lot of stories about the botánica's past?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. There'd be old ladies and old men that came in. It was a white part of town, obviously,

and it was a soda fountain.

MS. CORDOVA: So when did it become a botánica?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I don't know the whole history. My life was so busy and I was hung over half the time, and horny, and having to buy 10,000 – you know, having to make money. Having to make art. So, you know, I didn't get around to all of that. It was just a whirlwind of energy. It wasn't a time of reflection and introspection. It was a time of just uncontrollable frenzy of action and talking.

I was talking, talking, talking, talking, talking about what my store represented, that it was a celebration and a healing process because it was making and acknowledging that who I became, is not only because of my Latino heritage, but because of the white heritage, also, who venerated my culture and exoticized it. So I had these rich, culture-vulture ladies and men who loved Mexican culture, supporting my business, as well as Mexican grandmothers who were appreciating the stuff that they were not allowed to appreciate in the past.

So do you see what I mean? I was making an honest assessment of the cosmopolitanism and the complexity of it, that happened in the city.

MS. CORDOVA: I'd also just like to sort of note how one of the things that I think has been absorbed or appreciated about the botánica that you created with it, it was also an installation. It was an art piece unto itself, in some ways.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: In every way. At that point in my life, my life had become art, from every meal, from every phone call, from seduction, to pleasure, to parties. Everything was, to me, a celebration and an expression of art. And I had many agendas on many different levels and many experiments I was trying to figure out. But one of them, definitely, was this very American – I don't know, maybe not American – but this contemporary way of looking at art as if it is something separate and apart and elite and different from what everybody is doing.

MS. CORDOVA: Did this finally give you the visibility as an artist, as opposed to a professional in law or something?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. It didn't take long. It didn't take long until – I mean, I'd still hear people, like, can you ever go back to law? No. It was a consoleti [ph], it was just an overnight success. And I think it was – people were curious that I was a lawyer, but it's a pretty common story when you hear about gay lawyers who open flower shops and restaurants, I mean, straight lawyers too. But, you know, it's not that unusual where lawyers quit.

But I was still viewed by most people in my town as a storekeeper and not as an artist yet. It was not being understood as an art piece yet. Some people make fun of me when I consider it an art piece.

MS. CORDOVA: When did that likely change?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Probably two things happened. Internally, I did a – well, no, I think it finally changed when Maaretta Jaukkuri gave me my Artpace residency.

MS. CORDOVA: So she was instrumental in –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I know Linda and Laurence, who you just met earlier. Laurence was dating Linda at the time. [Laughs.] And I know they believed in me and they were very proud of the store. And they brought everyone to it. And they were thrilled when Maaretta understood.

But I really – I remember bitching because here comes the Jesse Amado flag again. I had a gorgeous Jesse Amado piece in the back, and she was just raving about it. I'm like, great, you know. [Laughter.] Out of all this gorgeous stuff that I'm doing, you know, this Northern European woman loves this Joseph Beuys-looking piece. [Laughter.] You know, I was bitching and bitching and bitching. And crying and worried, you know? And really worried that no one believes me. Maybe I am an idiot, you know? Maybe I am just trying to promote myself. I just had to do it.

But then I found out later that I was chosen for that. And that was my lucky break. And then the other lucky break really was Alejandro Diaz, one of my best friends, writing his masters thesis on me.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. Okay.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: We'll get to that later.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. Let's talk about – actually, before we even get to Artpace, maybe I could just – you did the "Blue Star on Houston Street" [1994] exhibit.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: I just think that's really kind of special, and I thought maybe I'd ask you a little bit about it.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Okay. So I'm real happy. Things are happening fast now. I'm on the board of Blue Star [Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, Texas]. You know, I still consider myself a kid also. You know, not only did I consider myself a lawyer dilettante, but I was just a kid. And even people 10 years older than me seemed like grownups, you know. And the grownups were starting to – I was starting to hang around with them. And they had nice houses and they traveled and they were cool, and they had known famous people in their lives, you know?

And I was starting to get accepted and put on those boards. Not that many boards. Really just the Blue Star board. Joe Diaz, I think, put me on the board. He was president at the time. Joe Diaz is the guy we talked to at Taco Haven today. The CAA was coming to town, the College of American Artists, or something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: The College Art Association.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: College Art Association. And, I don't know, it was just an idea I had. You know, it was very Donald Judd-esque. I didn't really realize it. It was fascist. It was very fascist of me, but I wanted to make my empty fucking downtown glamorous and gorgeous. And it was very much like a Potemkin village, you know. You know the Potemkin village story where, you know, when the czar was going through Russia, the czarina, they made fake villages and fake façades, and they dressed all the townspeople in fancy clothes, but behind it was just rot and decay and slums. And that's really what I did.

And I was also angry because I was angry at all these white business owners that had deprived me of living in an urban space. There is – why are these gorgeous buildings, which at the time they were built were the most expensive buildings per square foot in Texas. They were the most beautiful buildings, of marble and granite and crystal. You know, they were the best.

And they're all dead. And, you know, I turned my little storefront into a world-known store in two days. It took me two days to open it, you know. You don't need millions of dollars. You don't need to wait for McDonald's to come and rent your space.

So this white boy corporate greed, these men with quail paintings in their offices and bad shoes and country club memberships, I hated them. But, you know, I had to be nice to them because they were going to allow me to do the storefront. Now, I didn't – Rolando Briseño criticized me, typical Rolando. "You were supposed to – you should have sent applications six months in advance, and it wasn't fair how you chose people, and all that." And I said, "Rolando, you can be in the show." "Oh, okay."

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: You know, so there was a lot of politics going on. And I chose some artists that had to go there, and did controversial pieces about aborted fetuses and stuff like that. I could have kept the show fluffy, but I was also wanting – I was mad at them because they were angry that there was art depicting controversial issues in the work, yet these storefronts were covered in human feces, which I cleaned up myself. No one helped me. I got shovels and shoveled up human excrement. I washed their windows. I made the whole Houston Street look stunning. Me and three friends did it.

MS. CORDOVA: Who else?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Like my friend Rudy Lopez is going to come help me later, and a few other volunteer friends. I don't remember at that time. And we turned our little, scary, beautiful ghost town for a few brief hours. George Cisneros had done this electronic chime piece so there was these chimes going on. And then the opera was going on, so there was like thousands of people walking down. And there was the art conference and it was – [whispers] – beautiful. And every store had shiny windows again and avant-garde – not avant-garde – but the best art that the city had to offer. I loved it and it was easy to do.

But I was a hothead. I remember the newspapers would interview me and I would make it clear, you know, that D.B. Harold, the real estate agent – you know, all these buildings are owned by Houston investors that don't care about San Antonio, and they're not doing anything creative. And it would just take a little bit of capital, and just a lot of imagination to make this a thriving, urban space. They don't have to wait for McDonald's or Starbucks to move here, you know. And, no one believed me. But I loved doing that. That was fun. That was fun.

Then maybe my head got a little big. On the board meetings, I just kept insisting that arts organizations stop trying to copy big cities that we're not, and to celebrate what we have in the vernacular. I'm not being a

regionalist, but I was just being a pragmatist. Don't spend money trying to copy something else when you have qualities of your own that will really put us on the map. And that's what - so I gave up, you know. I don't do it - I do it with my own career now. But that's what I was trying to persuade arts organizations.

And I'd got hotheaded in the meetings, you know. I think even Rolando scolded me sometimes, because I would just get too angry. I was just too impatient. I'm still impatient. Houston Street's still dead. How can that be, you know? I just don't understand it. Why don't they allow - even if it's just thrift shops for now or something, or free rent, just to have some life in there for a while, or artists studios with leases that say, you know, you will have to get out of here 30 days notice, but we want some life here.

MS. CORDOVA: So you managed to get this wonderful Artpace residency, and this was maybe even sort of the beginning of Artpace -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was pretty soon, yeah. It was pretty soon.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe a couple of years back -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. And actually, rumor has it - no, I'd better not - I'm not going to down there - it's a rumor, but never, but never mind. But Rob Storr was very, very, very fond of my first piece. I was definitely on the shortlist of getting the inaugural show, rumor has it.

MS. CORDOVA: Rumor has it. All right. We'll leave it at that.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: [Laughs.] Yeah.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: And this piece really did seem to give you a higher profile, not just here in the local community, but in a larger sphere.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Let me think. [Pause.] I didn't care about the larger sphere yet. I really - this was my little pond that I was a fish in. So I wasn't even thinking in those terms. It was all about being accepted in San Antonio. So I was still - that was my point of reference. And it did give me credibility, but not till years later. Not till years later. Like Maaretta Jaukkuri, who had kind of forgotten about me, was asking my best friend - one of my best friends, Tracey Moffat, to be in a show.

And I was at Tracey's house and I wrote Maaretta, "I'm in the Whitney Biennial [2000]. All these wonderful things have happened to me and I owe it all to you," you know? And she says, you know, you're right. You need to be in this KIASMA show. And they flew me to Finland twice, and I did a gorgeous show there, you know. So, yeah, it eventually led to bigger things. It definitely gave me affirmation.

And the show was okay. It was okay. I still had some issues to work out. I had turned it into a very modern boutique, clean version of my Botánica.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, that's what it seems. Like, it was - again, you were using the grid sort of.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Sort of. I was using - yeah. And I was kind of Stanley Kubrick or "2001 Space Odyssey." I was mixing high style or modernist style with botánica baroque and queer aesthetic.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. And then I was struck by a brochure description for Artpace, I think, that referred to Claes Oldenburg's, those four -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: And I wondered, did you even have any idea about that? Or what do you think about that comparison? Is that -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think it's very valid. When I was in law school, I would hate reading my case books so much that I would study in the undergraduate library and get like a four-foot stack of art books and just do cursory inspections of them. Yes, now that I know more about Claes Oldenburg and his store, yeah, the uncanny - yeah, very, very similar what we were doing. But I never thought his work was that pretty. I really didn't. I thought it was a little too kitschy for my taste. It wasn't quite coming from the same place.

MS. CORDOVA: Kitschy is an interesting word because I think sometimes your work gets described as kitschy.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And I just have given in to that. Just makes it easier, you know. But, you know, I think Donald Judd is kitsch. [Laughter.] I'm not kidding. You know, so that's fine with me.

MS. CORDOVA: But you've given into that word. What is that – did you reject it at first?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I was trying to say – you know, because kitsch always reminds me, of also, like gay guys that work with Barbie dolls. You know what I mean? And there's nothing wrong with that, but I'm not that kind of fag artist. I was more – you know, the things I use I think are pretty. I just think they're beautiful, and not for the sake of kitsch. They also are humorous. But, I am looking for things that take me to a place that explained this cultural journey I'm going through, between high and low, and the baroque and the contemporary. It's not just any item I like, you know. But I like humor in my work, I definitely do.

MS. CORDOVA: Your work is often very funny.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, definitely. I like funny work.

MS. CORDOVA: Just creating in juxtaposition to certain things? I mean, how do you come up – how do you generate some of your ideas or do you have a process?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. The process is – if I'm working with three dimensional objects, it is just accumulating objects that are stirring to me, that definitely strike a chord because of their beauty. And there's two schools of beauty I like. I like the rococo, and then I like this kind of Noguchi modernism, primitivism. I like two looks. You know, like these chairs are from my store, those feather dusters are from my store. You know, that painting is from my store. That was from my store, you know.

But, anyway, Yeah, I just want things that are beautiful to me, and intelligent, and dumb, at the same time, and have an element of pathos in them, and are gestural. I love objects that are gestural. So it's not just kitsch for the sake of kitsch. And then I like putting them together in ways that are funny, and usually ways that also can take a deeper meaning. You know, like those feather duster trees, those are topiaries, those are something that's supposed to be elegant, but they're also the feather dusters that maids use.

MS. CORDOVA: What I'm – what was maybe your next big project after Artpace?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: After Artpace – I was a player, you know? And so my projects were parties and making money and getting pretty decadent, like I say, again, in the drinking alcohol, and drugs and parties. I was a vampire. It was late nights and I had some glamorous friends. I just thought I was a rock star, or was, you know. And I bought this old – I rented this old dilapidated mansion and painted it all stark white and just furnished it in Plexiglas and primitives and it was – [whispers] gorgeous.

And I was so happy, and I just had – I was like Donald Judd. I was a dollhouse queen. So it was my little dollhouse and I would just walk all by myself in all these rooms. Then I did an altar for the spirits of Drew and Danny, which was gorgeous, and it was just two bowls of water in this stark white room. And it was featured in a book called *Altars and Icons* [Jean McMann; San Francisco: Chronicle, 1998].

And it's the first time that, in print, I had been able to finally articulate my big beef about form versus substance, which is a premise that I had also learned in law school, where, you know, the form of the culture and the substance of the culture sometimes exist together, but often there is the substance of the culture that does not exist in what one might consider the form of the culture. And often the form of the culture is devoid of any substance.

MS. CORDOVA: And that really seems like a striking issue here in San Antonio, where there is such –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There's so much substance. And it is so being destroyed and it's genocide.

MS. CORDOVA: Colonized.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Colonized and controlled and sanitized, yet the substance – it's like the shells. Like all these white people are collecting shells. They want the shells, but the conch that's in there they're eating or they're throwing away, you know? That's really a metaphor. You know, San Antonio's full of shell collections: shells of the culture. And there's still big, huge, stinky buckets of conch all over the place that someone has to save and protect.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I think – I know this tape is coming to a close, so shall we take a break and come back to another tape?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. We'll stop this one.

[Audio break.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Are you – this is boring for you?

MS. CORDOVA: No, it's great.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Are you sure?

MS. CORDOVA: I'm positive with it. [Laughs.] All right. So we are – I love it.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, good.

MS. CORDOVA: We are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Franco Mondini-Ruiz. This is Session Two and Disc Two on July 8, 2004.

And, Franco, I thought I'd start by asking how did Bard College ["Infinito Botánica: New York," Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York] happen?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Okay. Actually, after my Artpace show I have gotten a couple of good breaks and people believing in me. The CAM [Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas]. Dana Friis-Hansen gives me a show called "Simply Beautiful [1997]." And I'm going through this rock star stage and I'm being a bit cocky and doing kind of controversial shows and being a little bratty and subversive.

I'm delivering. I'm still green. Like, for example, I send Dana Friis-Hansen slides in an envelope without cardboard or anything. I didn't even know that yet, and I was a successful artist. And it just shows how behind we were in San Antonio. All these skills, these little skills that will make you a successful artist. And Dana was kind of embarrassed and freaked out for me that someone of my level didn't even know how to send a slide through the mail. And the slides were all mangled and ruined.

At the lecture at the CAM show, I started giving my spiel about exoticism, and what a dearth of Latino artists there are in major institutions throughout the United States, and especially in Texas. And I remember Dana just turned pure white because it was supposed to be some luncheon for ladies. You know what I mean? But it was just the way I talked. And even though maybe he was upset that I had done that, we're still friends and I think he respects me. But Mexican ladies came up to me with tears in their eyes, saying thank you for saying – you know, things were being said that were not supposed to be said in polite company. And I didn't say it in ugly ways, I just spoke the truth.

Then Dana also put me in another show at Blue Star, called "Double Trouble [1995 "Double Trouble: Mirrors/Pairs/Twins/Lovers," Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, Texas]." I remember the piece was going to be just this mirrors, but I kind of switched the piece and it was so gorgeous. But it's really where I started to get assertive and very confident with my aesthetic. And I called it "Double Trouble," I think – no, I called it *Let's All Chant*, and it's from that song, "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, let's all chant." And just played an endless loop on these huge 12-foot-high speakers, monolithic speakers. And in the middle I had this swinging lamp upside down, a red wig and huge piles of fake cocaine. And every smart gay guy or hip person in town just said, "That was awesome." You know, that was just – because it was so real, and it was such an unspoken expression of a subculture, an underground culture.

MS. CORDOVA: It was a specific identity that you were –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was like Mexican drag queens paying their last dollar on cocaine and then getting busted and running away. It was hilarious. And, you know, Jesse Amado got mad at me because I didn't use a blonde wig.

MS. CORDOVA: Why?

[Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Just leave it at that – good – not "why". But you know, those kinds of things I'd get scolded for – [laughter] – you know? I'd say, "But Jesse, a Mexican drag queen would have used a red wig or something. He goes, "He would have been much more glamorous a blond wig." And he was kind of serious. He was like, that was a flaw in the piece. So here was this weird, self hating issues that we all were dealing with, you know? And then Dan Goddard, the critic, who is pretty nice to me, you know, he said something like, it was a ersatz installation that he couldn't bear to even enter, you know. So there's a little bit of homophobia in the art world too. So that was my most glamorous, overt piece.

Now, this Marfa show ["Ballroom" 2004] is covered in cocaine now. So it's become like a joke.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you mean covered in cocaine?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Not in cocaine, but about 12 of the pieces depict cocaine vignettes, rolled up bills and postage scales with piles of cocaine in them. It's a very, very important issue because cocaine has so much to do, also, with race and class and culture and hypocrisy and double standards and international trade and pleasure. You know, it's how gay people want to party, and it's not accepted. And it's probably safer than alcohol, not that I'm a big cocaine [inaudible]. And it's also one of the most important imports between the United States and Central and South America, if not the most important. I mean, it's - and also drugs became illegal because of fear of the races. San Antonio was the first city that marijuana became illegal.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh - that it was put in the books. Because they were afraid the Mexicans would start raping the white women. Cocaine became illegal because they were afraid that black people would start getting too aggressive and rape their white women.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it reminds me that you were also in the show, "The Ecstatic," at the Trans-Hudson Gallery [New York, New York, 1999].

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: Which I guess was created to sort of protest drug laws. Is that the case?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. But it was floppy. And Alejandro curated it - and, bless his heart, he's done so much for me - but his heart wasn't into this and he wanted to make a pissy, pretty show that had nothing to do with the premise of the piece. And he missed his boat. Now, in hindsight, I could have done so many hilarious, shocking pieces that would have jumpstarted my career even faster. But I wasn't ready. And I did some pissy, pretty piece too. The critic liked my piece, but he said it had nothing to do with the premise, and the show was very weak. Very, very weak, what Alejandro had done. The only really drug-related piece was Fred Tomaselli's marijuana leaf paintings.

MS. CORDOVA: And what piece did you do?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I did this piece that I created follies. I just had all these little jars and they had rococo cutouts of figurines with this like Crayola clay - this new type of spongy clay - I made for follies and ruins and all that. So it had a little bit to do with decadence, and it was lavender-colored, and there was like hundreds of them. So like this big city full of rococo figurines, filled with jars of baroque ruins - not baroque ruins, but of Italianate follies that you'd find in an English garden.

The first piece I had done, Simon Watson didn't like, and it would have been much better. It was a big collegey, it was a bit juvenile, it was this cocaine donut factory that I was making all out of cardboard and stuff. It was really funny.

MS. CORDOVA: In some ways I've become very suspicious of your powdered donuts.

[Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, exactly. The powdered donuts. Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] Now, when did you - I mean, it sounds so much like your experience of being gay is also sort of connected to your experience of using drugs or participating in a certain drug culture.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. It's very immature and it's very nerdy, [inaudible]. You know, I was the A student in high school and I was on the fringe of being popular, but never allowed to be cool because my parents were so strict. And this it's just revenge of the nerds. It's very immature, and I do it so overtly. I don't even like the stuff that much. I like the idea of it and the glamour. I love rebelling against culture. I love the beauty of it, I love the expense of it, and I love the power it yields. If I have the cocaine, I get to run the show, you know? And I'm learning that.

So if I went to a therapist and said, "Why am I a drug abuser," a lot of it is power. I can seduce boys, I can seduce girls, I can get things my way real easily. And it's good because I think I run things better than most other people do. You know, I really do. I know how to socially lubricate. Not all the time but in many - and most of my friends are very astute socializers. But it just became a trick. You know, like, let's make the world a better place, and here's a bag of cocaine to smooth everything out. And let's be glamorous and naughty together, you know? Plus, you know, it's self-medicating. Takes the pain away and all that.

But it's also this - you know, if you ask me what my favorite movies are, they are - and, you know my true ethos is movies like *Valley of the Dolls*, you know. Deep down I'm this self-made, small-town, glamorous woman who will eventually destroy herself. You know.

MS. CORDOVA: You are *Sunset Boulevard*. [Laughs.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, exactly. Uh-huh. I was. But I'm snapping out of that, you know. In my mid-40s the romance of that has finally run out, and now I see myself – something that I kind of had feared – but kind of like, those real energetic queens that own really cool cookie shops or something. [Laughs.] You know, that's kind of the direction I'm going in. And I kind of did that with the Botánica too, but I was – I thought higher of myself at the time. Now I want to be just busy and happy.

MS. CORDOVA: It does sound like you're also, though – I mean, you've constantly been grappling with these real extremes. Like these issues of death, morbid – I mean, facing death in very real ways, both for yourself and for all the people that are around you. But also living this high life and adjusting things: that you need that high. Right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh. "Likely to dangle and fangle yourself to death." That's a quote from that, yeah "But I won't let you", you know. That's what she says.

Yeah, some of it is, you know, self-dramatization. And part of it's being Catholic, part of it's being rebellious, part of it's being immature. Part of it just is that, you know, life is so short. I want to snort and consume anything I want, and they shouldn't – and I don't want to be controlled. I had a tyrannical father and I will not be controlled anymore. And I just pray to God I don't get caught, you know, if there is a God.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Right. You're [inaudible].

How have you changed spiritually? Or what kind –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I am coming to terms with the fact that – I am totally delighted in the fact that when I die, I am just going to be eaten by worms and turn into energy and dirt and flowers, and all is vanity. And we just lived and we died and we became dirt and dust. And there's nothing – a little bit of me will live in some people's memories and brainpans for a little while. And it's just not that big a deal. You know, I want to be buried in the dirt or in a wooden box. I don't even want to be cremated, I think that's too process-oriented.

And spiritually – I don't know exactly what a spirit is. I just know, as human beings, we have an intelligence and a level of consciousness that has made our existence very weird. [Laughs.] We're animals that are well-aware that we're going to die, and that's what it's all about. And so we have this consciousness about life, and we create all these myths to comfort ourselves.

But of all the bad that comes out of it, the ultimate reality, I think – my spirituality, my faith is poetry. That is the human condition. We are poetic creatures, I feel. Art is poetry, believing in God is poetry, believing that your ancestors or your mom, who's dead, maybe, and you still think she's around. It's just a poetic existence. And that's what I believe in, poetry. I believe everything, myths and all this kind of stuff, is just a poetic interpretation of reality.

MS. CORDOVA: I wanted to sort of draw you back to the Bard College, because I remember that I veered you off that.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh. Okay. Bard, okay. So Alejandro Diaz loves me. Remember, he was part of the Tommy Glassford, Michael Tracy, gloomy, calling-people-cunts art world – not that Tommy does that, but Michael would have done that. And I had a hunch he was wrong – [laughs] – you know, that was a pose. I wanted him to strike my pose, not that pose.

I remember going to dinner with him, and I'd say, Alejandro, we're going to be showing in Paris and Rome someday. We're going to make it, but we're not going to make it unless we help each other and act mature and don't copy other lame examples. And we had fights, but I think he believed in me. And eventually, because of the Botánica years, he's my friend and not a rival, but he's definitely a peer. I opened Infinito Botánica, he instantly loved it and was a good customer and loves me.

And I remember him saying he wanted to go to Bard College. I said, "Alejandro, don't" – I really said, I said, "Stop going to school. Just do something." I said, "Take that apartment and open a gallery with it," because I had already had a show there. The guy that didn't put me in the show he did in Mexico City, I had moved out all my junk and turned my apartment into this [inaudible] into a white-walled gallery, and throw him this lavish party, you know, only to not be put in a show about being gay and Mexican, while all my straight white friends were put in it.

Anyway, so I said, "Alejandro, just do it," and he did it, you know, and after about a few months he was saying,

you know, "I have the top gallery in San Antonio." And I'm thinking, no, I have the top gallery. [Laughter.] You know, but his survived, and it's great. It's a wonderful thing. Because of Artpace, I think, and because of the confidence that a lot of the Latino community was getting, two of Artpace's - I mean two of Bard's class, of Alejandro's year, were Latinos from San Antonio, Henry Estrada and Alejandro Diaz.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did he choose to write his thesis on you?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Because he cannot make up his mind if he's a curator or an artist, so he was cheating. He was hoping what we were doing was really kind of a collaboration. He loves me and he loves my art, but he wasn't ready to just be a curator. He wanted to treat our show as a collaboration, and which I went along with at the time because it was just overwhelming. I mean, I was halfway in a drug stupor, my health was declining, you know, but I said, I'll do it. So I closed my store, my health declined really bad, I was very ill and not realizing it yet.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was about 1999.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. I was dying and didn't realize. So I borrow things from my mother, who's really bad about lending me stuff, and borrow things from friends and all the stuff that I had left over from Botánica, and I ship it over to Bard. And I just had this vision I would do this grid. I don't know why. And it turns out beautiful, it was a lot of work, but we had a pretty healthy budget. He talked his professors into doing his thesis statement on me, which was outrageous. You know, I was just an unknown, gay shopkeeper in San Antonio. But I promised to him that I would deliver, and I did.

Even as the show was going on, he got very jealous because it didn't turn out as he had seen, that it was Franco Mondini/Alejandro show, especially when the Whitney Biennial and the Museo del Barrio [New York, New York] and SITE Santa Fe and other galleries were giving me their cards and saying, call me immediately. So he turned me into a star overnight, but should have had some mercy on me because I was getting sicker and sicker, you know? And as a curator, he let me down. When it was time to pack the piece up and ship it out and all that, he just, you know, "Drop dead," you know. Half of me felt like saying, you're supposed to be a curator. You're not even helping me, even if I were a total stranger. You know, the bad blood was starting. But things cooled off.

Oh, yeah, I'm living with him at Bard, and he starts getting so jealous of me that he's like throwing the telephone in my face. And I feel so sorry for myself. And I'm not trying to. I'm trying my best to be cheerful. But he's drinking and he's mean and he's human, and he just was sick of me. And I had nowhere to go. I had no home and no possessions anymore. I just had the knowledge that I had made it. It was a miracle. And I had owed it to him. And I told his, countless times, I'd say, "I made it. I can't take you with me right now. It's about me. But I will make this up to you. I promise," you know?

And in a way I had helped him too. I got him away from that Michael Tracy-Tommy Glassford poseur lifestyle. So, you know, we helped each other. So then I moved with him - [laughing] - to New York. I have to, I have nowhere else to go. And it was great at first. We are broke. I write Linda Pace a letter, saying, Linda - I don't even know how to use a computer yet. You know, I turned it on - and I'm sick. So, you know, him trying to teach me how to play the computer. I couldn't learn. It was just hard. And I was getting weaker and my arms were hurting.

And he was - it was fun at first, and then he got real mean to me, to the fact that I was afraid he'd kick me out, so I'd scrub his toilet all day long, and just the house would be impeccable. And I'd buy him presents every day. And he was so jealous of me, he turned green. He looked like an opossum. And I felt so awful. And I was sleeping on his couch and he wanted to sleep on the couch, not in the loft. And he loved me and felt guilty. And we would have good days. We were like brothers.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you think of what -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Even at Bard I - no, at Bard I escaped. I left. I took a train and like the police picked me up because I was walking to the train station. And I explained to them that I had this friend and he doesn't want me to live with him anymore, and they felt sorry for me. And I wasn't trying to feel sorry for myself, but I really had to get out of there. He hated me so bad. But for some reason I hooked up with him. We made up and I lived with him in New York. Well, because - okay, go ahead.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I just wanted to ask, what did you think of what he wrote in his thesis?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It is highly romanticized. It's great. A few of the tangents are, to me, not accurate, but some of them are brilliant. People that have read it, love it. Love it.

MS. CORDOVA: What would you pick out as one maybe inaccurate assessment and one wonderful assessment?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Some of the pathos in it is unnecessary. For example, the trash piece I did in Mexico City,

even other critics have pointed – you know, he said it was me likening myself to worthless trash, you know, which is maybe him projecting some of his own feelings onto me. The parts that were great were just the unabashed – just, you know, revenge of decadent gay queens. We did it our way and we won. You know, that’s what that was getting across. A little cocky, but, “yes,” we did it, and it’s right. And so he shows the part – he talks all about the parties and the drugs and, you know, it’s just all this. There was no hypocrisy in it. It was the true story.

But a little more pathos, a little more sorrow, making my mother a little more pathetic than she really is, making my father a little more dogmatic than he really is. But it’s okay. It definitely is a good read, especially for a master’s thesis. Plus the show turned out beautiful.

MS. CORDOVA: This is your *High Yellow* piece, right?’

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, the first piece was called *Gorgeous Politics*, which was the main piece, on a huge, huge platform. We had some materials left over and an extra room. And the rooms at Bard were so beautiful that you could put anything in there and it would look stunning. So I owe a lot to the beauty of the Bard space. *High Yellow* was an afterthought, and did it in a few hours and it turned out to be the stronger piece. But it was very Mexican-style, like, you know, let’s make another art piece. And I worked with cakes and cookies and yellow squash, and – [whispers] – cigarettes, and marshmallows and donuts. And real food. I was still using real food at the time.

MS. CORDOVA: You use a lot of marshmallows. Do they have any special meaning?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They just look kind of ambiguous, because they look like high art in a way, and they’re so low and they’re so trashy. You know, they’re just something. They’re sculptural looking.

MS. CORDOVA: And did you call it *High Yellow* from the start?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, I did call it *High Yellow* from the start, because it was a tall piece and it was yellow. [Laughter.] Plus *High Yellow* had to do a lot, now, with my realization that people like Chuck and myself and Anne Wallace, and most people that you would meet in our world were high yellow. We were like white people that have tried to acculturate to my culture, as well as Latinos that have acculturated to their culture. You know, *High Yellow* is a reference to a black person or a mulatto that almost passes for white.

And the people in my world, in my generation, that are some of the creative successes, right now, are often high yellow. For some reason we have been acculturated enough that we “pass” in a way.

[Phone rings.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we’re back recording. And we were talking about “High Yellow” and its meaning.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: *High Yellow*, yeah. So the piece became – I hope I’m not being Pollyanna and trying now that – you know, sometimes when – like when you hear – artists that were once bad boys or rebellious, now are all mellow and PC. And I hope I’m not following that track, but I have reached a point where I was starting to – I’ve always been – part of me tries to be reconciliatory because it would be hypocritical for me not to, because I have benefited from both the white world and the Latino world.

So *High Yellow* became a metaphor for this hybrid space where, I feel, I had found some safety. I always thought I’d find it in the world of modernism and intellectualism, but I have found safety in this hybridity. You know, like Anne Wallace, who is this old, old money, ranching-family woman who I totally, totally trust, who knows who she is but also venerates my culture, speaks Spanish better than I do and is a good person; as well as Latinos, who might be totally acculturated on the American side and are also good people. So it’s this hybridity, this *High Yellow* that I started to represent in my art.

MS. CORDOVA: And so that was the show that there must have been a big reception of some kind?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There was a small reception afterwards. Dwight Hobart, who was the partner of Drew Allen, that owned Liberty Bar, he’s this old, old white, ranching aristocrat, also, who I’ve had a lot of painful interludes with in my life. But he loves Alejandro and he made homemade, I remember, meringues for the party. [Laughs.] No, it was a very small reception. There was a good turnout, though, because, by coincidence, there was, I think, 60 curators from around the world visiting Bard College that week. So that was lucky break Number One.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I was at the right place at the – it was my destiny. I was at the right place at the right time.

MS. CORDOVA: They were there for a conference or something?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: I see.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So I was at the right place. It was destiny. And who knows what would have happened if that show had not been discovered. I might have gone back to San Antonio and maybe died. Maybe just, you know, got ill. It was this drive and this knowing that I had these wonderful things coming up that kept me going. Andrea Miller-Keller was one of the curators for the Whitney Biennial and she – at the last minute, I decided to add some texts, wall texts. And it's those wall texts that had won Andrea Miller-Keller over.

At the same time, I also wowed-over Simon Watson, who used to write "Simon Says" for *Village Voice* and really has established many artists in New York. He's the one that can sniff out the new talent. Totally, totally embraced me and loved me and listened. I was still in my ranting stage. I was still ranting about San Antonio and, you know, the disparities of it. And he'd confuse me. He'd tell me that I let the San Antonio thing go, but he also loved my anger. He found it – because it was real. It's dissipated now, but he became my mentor.

Tracey Moffatt came to the show and totally believed in me, and she was a mentor. So I had – Julia Herzberg got me the Museo del Barrio show ["Mexique"] and many grants, including Pollock-Krasner, when she knew that I was ill and broke. Did the AC turn off? What happened?

MS. CORDOVA: It might have.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Chuck, did we turn the AC off?

MS. CORDOVA: We're back.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: What happened?

MS. CORDOVA: Julia Herzberg –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, yeah, and Julia Herzberg eventually starting getting me on this grant circuit.

MS. CORDOVA: Uh-huh.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: So I'm living with Alejandro and writing Linda Pace for \$5,000 with this long letter saying these are the next 12 things that are going to happen to me, because all these things happening. And she sends me a check and it saves our life. Then Alejandro says, "Franco, you know, you can go to a clinic. I think you should go to a clinic." So as I'm walking to the clinic, I collapse. And then a security guard walks me the rest of the way.

And in Brooklyn – I lived in Park Slope, which was fancy, but this was the poor part of Brooklyn. There was nowhere to sit. Every ledge was covered in nails to keep people from sitting anywhere. So I had to collapse on the filthy street, on the sidewalk. And a security guard got a taxi for me. And the nurses said, "You're sick." They could just tell by looking at me. They checked me for AIDS and I had 32 T cells left.

And they rushed me to the – and I said, "Don't get an ambulance. Just ride me to the hospital. I'm fine now." They go, "No-o-o, you're not." And they put me in the emergency ward, and they were so cruel. They kept me there for 14 hours. And it was a state hospital. They had every intern – you know, they probably had to check off admitting an AIDS patient. So for 14 hours, interns would come and ask me the same questions over and over again. They just used me as a guinea pig. And they thought I was going to at least go blind or something, or not be able to walk, and I recovered fine.

Then, but they let me out too early and I went to my sister's house and I got a relapse and I was in the hospital again for two or three weeks. And all this time, though, I feel fine, and I'm happy because I've lost weight. [Laughs.] I weighed like 170 pounds. I was so happy. And then I curate the show called "Latino Redux ["Latino Redux: A New Collection of Stories, Lies, and Embellishments," North Texas State University, Denton, Texas]" with Diana Block, and it's a great show. It was supposed to travel, but they never found the right venues for it, and no one wanted it. But it was so cool and beautiful, and it has a nice catalogue.

And I'm real skinny and weak, and I remember Rolando saying, "God, you look bad." I said, "Thank you, Rolando." And then there's the Museo del Barrio show. New York is really, really, really rough.

MS. CORDOVA: So the Museo del Barrio show comes before the Whitney?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And that's your "Mexique?"

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. Which sounds like it was just beautiful.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I got good reviews. I've gotten all good reviews. And it was very hard to do "Mexique" because I was very, very weak. I'd have to have people walk me to the subway. And I was just in automatic pilot. And I'd come home to Alejandro and he wanted me to die. He hated me. He wanted me to die. And I was just about to. So I couldn't stand it any longer.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you two ever a couple?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, yeah, but briefly, just very, very briefly. This was just professional jealousy. He can't help it. It's just a character flaw he has. But he also helped me. You know, he was very generous and saved my life and made my career. But everything that - all the good thing that was happening to me, he really wanted it for himself.

MS. CORDOVA: And "Mexique," it was sort of this re-creation of -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Of *Tenochtitlán*.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. What inspired that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Once again, it was my hyper-romanticization of Mexico, and also my realization of cultural reinterpretation of things, through the lens of a working-class Mexican. So I realized Mexico in middle-class aspiring to upper-class rococo kitsch. And it was just pretty. I just loved making ideal cities, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: Was that the first time that you used these sort of 18th century figures?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. I had actually used the first one at Blue Star in an auction, and no one understood it, and it didn't sell. And it was this baroque couple doing cocaine on a mirror. [Laughter.] That was the first - I don't know where that piece is now. You know, I'd give them away to my friends.

MS. CORDOVA: What I'm curious about is so often it's a man and a woman that you're painting together. I don't -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I know. I try - even all these - when you see my paintings, it's going to be mostly period women. I don't know exactly what - do I perceive myself as a woman or do I just like femininity or am I trying to balance the world out through femininity? Or is it the dolls I didn't get to play with? I don't know yet. But I'll paint men and I just can't stand it. I love men as sexual objects, but I don't find them as artistic muses. Very rarely do I. I do find women as artistic muses, and I do objectify them, you know? [Laughs.] So, that's another -

MS. CORDOVA: At least you admit it.

[Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, I do, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, what do you mean you objectify them? You just sort of define them as beautiful objects?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I mean I love women. I mean, as a gay guy, there's not that sexual tension. So, of course, I respect a woman for her intellect, and there's not this sexual tension that's in the way. But I just think women are pretty, you know, but not in a sexual way, in something I can't resist. I love fashion and femininity. And is it because I want to be a woman or - I don't know. I don't know yet. In my paintings, it's scary, because I'll do a little brush stroke and this gorgeous woman comes out, you know, with a beehive, gorgeous bouffant, and her pearl earrings and elegant limbs. I don't understand.

It might also be, you know, as a homosexual man, I identify with female power. I do not identify with male power. If anything, to me, a man is something to be dominated, you know? I have intercourse with men, preferably macho, straight men. So I see men as something to conquer and not something I see as a model. You know, my models are Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, and strong, glamorous, confident, intelligent women playing with female strategies of success - I think. But now why that turns out that I paint beautiful women in period costumes, I don't know yet.

MS. CORDOVA: And so -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But these baroque - what I also like is gesture. I love gesture. And that's why I'm always using these rococo figurines. Plus the joke that Mexican people don't have brown people in their houses. They

have these white-lady objects, you know, because they think they are white. They think they're white rococo figurines. So it's making a little funny stab at all that, and the disdain for Indian, for darkness. It's the exotic – the baroque figurines are the exotica of dark people while primitive sculptures and primitive art is the exotica of white-skinned people, unless it's dark-skinned people that have been acculturated to the point, that I have, that now I have dark-skinned exotica.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, it gets awfully complicated. [Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, it does. And then maybe aping the dominant culture.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. So do you ever put these figurines in sort of homoerotic situations?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Rarely. It just doesn't work for me. I don't enjoy making homoerotic art. I've done paintings that turn out to be this naked guy, and it's like hot and sexy. And then I eventually paint it over because I just can't stand it. It's just not my thing. I want chandeliers and dresses, and I guess, I'm craving civility and the female energy, female sentiments, adornment and beauty and tenderness and loveliness and female stuff. I love it.

And even males that are very frilly, maybe. I've really only done a few male figures, because I feel I have to, in this series of paintings. And even they are sexually ambiguous. So I don't know. I don't know what that means yet. You know, with the hoop skirt dresses and all that. But I think men are very beautiful. I mean, you've seen me flirt, like when I was with Pepé.

MS. CORDOVA: I've seen you flirt – [laughing].

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Before the night was out, I was playing with Pepé's toes. You know. I just use them as total kittens, but I don't paint them.

MS. CORDOVA: So how did the Whitney come about, or what was your reaction when you were notified?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, I had to keep it a secret for a long time because it could or could not happen. So that just added to my stress. I was also being ill and that, you know, my life might change, might not change. Andrea Miller told me, and she loved that quote most of all. She just wanted me to create somehow that spirit, of almost, like social sculpture or happening through the use of objects and I proposed to her the idea that I could do a store, my little pushcart, and it happened. She probably budgeted me like \$4,000 or \$5,000, but to their dismay, it cost another \$6,000, I think, to get the permit.

Larry Rinder, I think, he was the director at the time. No, it's not Larry Rinder. It was another man. Max Anderson was the director of the Whitney at the time, and I met him. I still was suspicious of a lot of things, and especially I didn't like straight white men in positions of power in the museum structure. Women were enabling me, but I feared straight white men, I didn't trust them. And sure enough, you know, he acted very lofty with me, and was never that personable with me – not that he had to be.

I remember, the pushcart at first was not a pushcart. It was just a simple card table, very Mexican style, with a paper tablecloth over it which, in the wind tunnel next to the Whitney, just looked like shit after a few minutes. He walked by with a group of important people and ignored the piece. He was, I think, ashamed of it. And so the next day or three days later, they built me this very deluxe, professional cart. So, you know, he didn't understand that I was playing on the whole fact of doing a rasquache on Mexican style.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: He was humiliated and embarrassed about it. It turned out my piece got good reviews again and was very successful. People still talk about it. And very exhausting because it was very cold even until mid-June on that street corner. I was supposed to do the booth three days a week, but I could only muster enough energy to do it once a week, sometimes twice. And it was hard. I had 300 to 400 objects that a lot of them, I would make.

MS. CORDOVA: I was thinking about that. It must have been extremely high pressure to be constantly replenishing the cart.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It was. It was total – it was just always hauling stuff and moving stuff and selling stuff and talking. I mean, I was excited. So there was a lot of adrenaline.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you manipulate each piece that you mould?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. Some pieces were just simply ready-made objects that I put my stamp on, but unique ones that really somehow worked, especially the mix of products. Somewhere I found these rococo porcelain

figures I could buy for 75 cents. I think I bought all of them. I bought hundreds of them. You know, old Jewish ladies bought them. Movie stars bought them. Kids bought them. And some of them I would manipulate and some of them were very strong pieces – not very strong, but were good pieces that now would easily sell for \$1,000, which I was selling for about \$5.

MS. CORDOVA: Like what? What is a piece that you remember that was strong?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There was this series of rococo figurines that were holding like plates of enchiladas, just the gestures really worked, you know, things like that, like “Mexican Mao,” those kinds of pieces. There was a lot of those, that type where the juxtaposition of the objects really worked well. There was giant Buddhas with, you know, a third eyes stuck on them and just melding of different cultures.

MS. CORDOVA: It’s interesting that sometimes, I mean, part of the piece you can imagine as lasting a long time, but other parts of the piece, like you’re not as in tune to it or something –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah

MS. CORDOVA: How do you deal with that as an artist, just that concern?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: At that time it wasn’t. At that time, I just loved the spontaneity and the freshness – no pun intended – of just working with real food, and it was just living – it was pure art. It was pure poetry. Like you’re spending \$5 for just a piece of spontaneous thought that your dog will eat or you’ll throw away or will end up in the junk sale someday, you know, somewhere else. And it wasn’t an issue at the time.

And people responded to it. I remember people – I had potatoes out of Alejandro’s refrigerator that were sprouting, and they were so beautiful. And, you know, well-dressed, intelligent people would buy it for \$5. I mean, my signature would be on it. So I just loved it.

MS. CORDOVA: Let’s see now. Did people confuse the cart? Did everyone realize it was part of the Whitney project?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, no. Okay, so yeah. There were, of course, people that bought stuff only because it was in the Whitney.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There were many people, though, that were just passers-by that bought objects, and very fascinating things would happen. A homeless person bought something that he felt was very beautiful and had some money to pay for it. A janitor boy, you know, from Colombia saw this pre-Colombian figurine, this obscure one, that I don’t know how I ended up with it, and he bought it and then said, I want to show you something. And he pulled up his shirt and he had a tattoo of that same god, you know. Real unusual things.

A man in a wheelchair bought all my pinwheels and I taped them to his automatic wheelchair, and as he moved, all these pinwheels went. It was magic. And grandmothers would buy things for their kids. Giant butterflies on sticks. And I just make hilarious things all day long.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you making things as you were there?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I would, I would. But it was cold and miserable. It was difficult. I mean, I would turn blue and my skin was so chafed because it was a wind tunnel.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, it also must have been a kind or odd experience to be part of the museum, but outside it.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. The hardest part would be when people just kind of – most people liked it, but some people hated it or were jealous or were crazy and would say, “Oh, this is a bunch of junk.” But most people were stopped in their tracks because it was pretty or it was just unusual. And a few, like neighborhood people, thought I was like this renegade vendor and they would say, “We’re trying to get rid of you people,” you know, all this kind of stuff. Yeah, so it was always something. But mostly, I was bringing in \$300 to \$400, \$500 a day. But I don’t know what happened to that money. Well, I knew, in New York, it would just evaporate.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you have any interaction with the other vendors?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. There were some African vendors, selling fake purses, that would watch my booth sometimes when I had to go to the bathroom and vice-versa, as well as the hot dog vendor who felt real sorry for me because I was all by myself and I couldn’t leave. So I lived on his hot dogs for a month.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] That must have established a friendship.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, he was very sweet. He'd always want me to rest in his van. I never really, did but he told me to like lie down in the van.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you get any sicker while you were doing this?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No. No, I recovered. I recovered. I went on the cocktail and my health is great now. It's magic.

MS. CORDOVA: Is it magic?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, yeah. It's just - yeah, overnight, you're just fine.

MS. CORDOVA: But expensive, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, oh, I forgot all about that. So I get poor. So Alejandro is being mean to me and I don't know what to do. I've got to get out of his space. So because I have AIDS, they send me a social worker and they put me on food stamps and disability, which I'm on right now, and medicine. So I'm kind of a ward of the state which now is a scary issue, you know, I'm leaving the state. A lot of different legal issues being worked out. But I'm even on food stamps for a while. And I needed it.

You know, I just felt I was contributing to society, and you know, the government was taking care of me. So I always thank New York for that. I eventually got off food stamps. But what I also got was a free apartment. And that was my big fight with Alejandro. I said, Alejandro, this is our lucky break. They will give both of us an apartment to live in, you know. They will pay for the rent for me living here, which will cover your rent too. So theoretically, Alejandro, that was his lucky break, that he would never have to work for a whole year or two. But he couldn't stand living with me enough to do it, you know? And that's unfortunate. I mean, I don't blame him maybe because he's a Scorpio and he needs his space - or no, he's a Sagittarius and they need space, and I'm a bigger than life personality.

But it was a decision that he could have made that, I think, would have helped his career because that's one reason for success is that I wanted it more than anything, and I put up with anything to do it. And so because of that, he works a full-time job. And he's succeeding, but it's too bad that he didn't turn this opportunity into a chance to really just devote himself entirely to his work.

So I move out and I get this wonderful, wonderful apartment on this gorgeous national historical landmark hotel that's been turned into this socialist living environment. So it's actors, it's formerly homeless people. It is people with HIV and a few other types. So it's really weird. You know, we have these little tiny rooms, but they were brand spanking new, and I was just thrilled and kind of bragging. I mean, here I am living in Manhattan, which is prestigious, you know?

So I'm kind of on the dole and at the same time, I'm also getting huge grants, not huge, but big. I'm starting to live kind of grandly, and I didn't own anything, so I needed the money. A lot of it went to taxes that I had owed before, which I thought - it was a big phenomenon that gays all thought they were dying, so they didn't pay their taxes or their bills. [Laughter.] It's true. And now that the cocktail, we have to pay our bills. So all my money went to back taxes and my credit has been totally ruined, because I stopped paying my bills when I was ill. But that's okay. I live on a cash basis now.

So I lived in this building. At first, I loved it and for two years, I fixed it up like a jewel box. It looked like Halston's yacht. I had, after a while, \$30,000-worth of riches in there. A little tiny apartment, but Takashimaya glasses, \$50 glasses and crystal, jewels and minks, and it was just gorgeous - and very sexy. I didn't have much sex in New York. It wasn't a sexy time because I was too tired. The building had real mean security, because there were formerly homeless people and a lot of crazy people in the building. So I always felt like a prisoner, kind of. But once I went into my room, it was this beautiful oasis. And artists would love it. They'd say this should be in a museum. It was a museum piece. It was an installation. As a matter of fact, all the items in that are in my new installation at Marfa.

MS. CORDOVA: Marfa.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. And I had four or five servants, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And how, how do you mean?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I had a woman that ran my errands and washed and ironed my clothes. I had two guys that did anything I wanted from getting me drugs to potato chips to hamburgers. I did fundraisers. I did parties. I always had like 25 projects going on and I had a full-time assistant, because I, if you can see my résumé, I was

busy. I had shows all over the world, nonstop, and grants and, you know, a busy social life and everything. So plus, I like the company, I don't like to be alone. It was fun. It was hilarious, you know, because I was in a room half this size and I'd have servants all day long.

MS. CORDOVA: It does –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But I needed them.

MS. CORDOVA: Like from the year 2000, you just went into overdrive.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I never stopped, never ever stopped. There'd be 30 e-mails a day to address and take care of and grants. And I've gotten almost everything I've applied for. So I was doing something right and delivering, meeting my deadlines, doing my work on time ahead of schedule and below budget. And I gave my money away. You know, the people working for me needed the money and I shared it. I loved my assistant. He drove me nuts. But, you know –

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Todd. And then I fell in love with him. I sexually harassed him. He could have sued me. [Laughter.] We were in close quarters for too long. But now we love each other very much.

MS. CORDOVA: Good.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It's Platonic – I wrote that book.

MS. CORDOVA: You wrote – [inaudible.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I mean, I did major things. I learned how to manufacture my art in saleable parcels. That's a problem that had to be dealt with because I was on this "UltraBaroque ["UltraBaroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art." Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; Modern Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California]" circuit and with "UltraBaroque," I had this gimmick where I said I'll do my Botánica everywhere I go. And that turned into a great boondoggle because each museum funded me another \$5,000, \$6,000 and I was a rock star in each city.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. But it seems to me that you have worked the perfect game end because you got to travel to each museum –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Twice, sometimes three times. I was just, you know, aye. But I was crazy and I was so Mexican and I took all my friends with me. I should have grown. I should have like schmoozed all these collectors and stuff. But I just wanted to bring my friends with me. I was still scared. You know, I was Mexican. I wanted to use all my cousins. You know what I mean? So I don't that any longer. But, yes, I was traveling all over the world nonstop.

MS. CORDOVA: And then, of course, the Helsinki show [2001, "ARS01 - KIASMA," Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland].

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Helsinki, I had to go twice. Spain, you know. And just lots of little things in New York. I was on every – because I became popular in New York and every fund raiser, I had to make pieces for. And this Julia Herzberg got me in touch with Frederieke Taylor who waited two or three years until she thought I was ready to do a show. I was scared of her, because she was so serious and stern. But I love her and she loves me and we had a very, very successful show, not profitable. I sold everything. But the production of three-dimensional sculpture in New York is a very expensive process. I made some profit. You know, I made great profit, but not a butt-load of money.

MS. CORDOVA: I have to say that some – in looking at your work, it's almost the antithesis of what a museum or a gallery would want, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think so.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, there you are outside the Whitney, selling these little goods, and the Whitney is sort of an institution where you're establishing names and you know, everyone knows that these paintings are valued at millions of dollars. And a gallery, of course, they are a business as well.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And they want prestige and a good reputation, and it's a game. It's all an illusion. You know, nothing has value innately, except food and water and air.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you feel like sometimes you are a critic of these institutions? Is that at all a piece?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Definitely, definitely. I am attracted and repulsed at the artificiality and the elitism of it, and the artifice of it. And the artifice is based on exclusion where contemporary art has become something that the masses can't understand. And, okay, that's fine. It's one facet of art. But that's snobbery. That's just buying expensive knick-knacks – to me. That's how I see it. And I'm part of the snobbery game because I'm an object-maker and I make knick-knacks for the rich and I don't want to do that. I want to make knick-knacks – I want to make objects of beauty that allow me to make a living, a modest living – a modest living and a glamorous lifestyle, that's what I want.

Yes, I am, like I say, attracted and repulsed by the whole construct of art. I don't understand why art costs millions of dollars. It's just – I think history will look back and find that this was an absurdity. And it was crass, crass elitism and snobbery.

MS. CORDOVA: I think maybe in some ways your Helsinki show was that perfect blending, right, because you took a high art form of the sort of glassblowing, traditional to Helsinki, and you used a lot of forms from Tijuana.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Tijuana bottles. Yes, exactly, and all these snobby European art dealers bought every single one of them and loved it and loved the humor.

Two things about Helsinki – I also have a very far flung theory that I'm going to articulate better in the next few years where – because the contemporary art world is a religion, is a cult. It's a faith, in what I'm describing as the poetry of life. It's poetry-making, and in some ways, it's very pure and spiritual, but in other ways it's becoming a corrupt institution like everything else.

In many ways, in the early days of Christianity, I always wondered why Christianity took over, and one of the main reasons was it allowed outsiders to be empowered. For example, land-owning women were allowed to have their own Christian sects of religion. People of color – not people of color, but outside minorities that were not Roman citizens, but had money, were also very welcome. And they were somebodies. In the contemporary art world, I think it became a world where, for example, women were first allowed to really express themselves and make the decisions, make policy decisions. And so I see all these chapels – I mean, I see all these galleries that are run by women, mostly in New York, as the chapels and little cults and sex, and the big museums have become the cathedrals.

But something is missing now. And it's a faith – it's a faith very modern way, no longer belief in the old gods. It's a belief in humanism; and I feel it's disappearing. I'm very suspect now of all these cities that are rushing to build these \$400 million to \$500 million contemporary art showcases. I think it's a total sham and waste of money. I think if you put \$500 million into the arts community and you don't need a building, oh, the amazing things that would happen to this country and this world. If you put \$5 million, but it's all those golf-playing, straight, white men directors that are caught on to this whole art world thing and they are empire building, and it has nothing to do with art. It just has to do with civic prestige.

And you know, I just cannot believe that artists are dying, don't have health insurance, are not taken care of, but we're building \$3-, \$4-, \$5-, \$6- hundred-million-dollar buildings to house art that was made two years ago. Not necessary. It's just this inflated, corrupt, endangering construct, I think. But I need to articulate that more. But something's wrong. Something's wrong when you're building buildings and not supporting the things that are supposed to go into these buildings.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it does seem like public art as a field is growing. Have you found – I guess you have the ones that – the MetroTech project [“Parklife,” MetroTech Center One, Brooklyn, New York, 2002-2003]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Most – yes, MetroTech is good because it really is allowing the construction of art in public places and it's sublime and happy and nice. Most public art, though, that's part of that two percent for the arts project sucks. Lame, ugly, stupid, for the most part, because you're under so many constraints. It has to be politically correct. It has to help the community. It has to help children with cancer. It has to do this. It has to do that. It has to be sensitive to this. It has to use materials that are part of the construction budget. It turns just into this monstrosity that we'd be better off without.

But something like Public Art Fund [New York, New York] that is funding an artist to do a project, not as part of a budget of building construction is good. But growing up in Texas, I thought everything was public art, you know, oil derricks and junk piles. You know, public art is always all around us.

But the construct of contemporary art, I'm getting very suspicious of. It's a comfort zone for people and it's a faith. It's a leap of faith that a Donald Judd or a Richard Serra and all those pieces are worth – even an impressionist painting is worth \$50 to a \$100 million – is a leap of faith, in something.

MS. CORDOVA: And just to sort of go back to others, your “Polvo en el Viento” is a bit of a change for you in terms of, I don’t know, style or –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes and no. In a way, I was still working with an object. I made a little sculpture, a gestural sculpture, but the piece was first intended – the MetroTech show was going to be a band, like the Brooklyn Academy of Music [New York, New York] or something like that. So they wanted a music related piece. That had kind of been lost in the shuffle. So, that would have been a very, very clever piece in that context. But it still worked in the sense of globalization and exoticization. And I just thought it was one of my little vignettes, but done at a human scale. So I could live with it. But, yes, it was out of the norm.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did it work exactly? The music was just playing all the time from it or –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes. Well, we found a real Andean flute-playing band, and I interviewed them because I had hunches about self-exotica that, you know, I’d been grappling with. And sure enough, my hunches were right. A couple of the musicians were authentic Peruvians. All of them were Peruvian, but two were, you know, from the villages, old men playing the instruments. Two were like, you know. One was an orthodontist, I think, and one had a Ph.D., you know, in something else. But they loved doing it and they would not have been caught dead wearing those clothes or playing that music in Peru. And the other one was very much like me. Didn’t speak Spanish, but was returning to his culture with a vengeance.

So it was, you know, I wanted to know who these people were, because it was such a metaphor to what I was doing. And the only reason – and they were cognizant of the fact that they owe it to Simon and Garfunkel, when they used that song “Condor Pasa” – [whistling] – yeah, that’s what started this whole vogue for the Andean flute playing music.

MS. CORDOVA: Crazy.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, crazy. And they play all over the world. I guess, they’re this cliché of cosmopolitanism. Oh, I am in this international city that has even –

MS. CORDOVA: And then, of course, playing a song –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: That’s why I called it “Dust in the Wind.”

MS. CORDOVA: “Dust in the Wind,” yeah.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It real pretty rendition they did.

MS. CORDOVA: So I think we’re moving along very nicely.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh, good, good.

MS. CORDOVA: We’re covering a lot of good territory. I did, at least, want to get you to talk a little bit more maybe about the “UltraBaroque” show because it went through so many transformations, different places. I know one of the stories I read, you were in San Francisco on September 11th.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: It was great. And you had been planning the installation at that point.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Right. Yeah. The show, like I said, became a successful gig. I think the museums were kind of not perturbed, but always really wanted to make sure they got their money’s worth out of me. Because, remember, they already had to pay for the show and then, all of a sudden, to top it off, they had to bring me in, and spend more money for me to do a show. So they usually tied me in with their youth projects or something like that. I try my best to be generous with my time and my energy. But some shows were more successful than others.

San Francisco-MOMA was a fiasco at first, because I found them kind of rude and cold to me. And I remember one time, they wouldn’t let me bring a cup of coffee into my space, and yet I was working with food. You know, there was piles of marshmallows and bread. [Laughter.] But I couldn’t drink my coffee. And they were overstaffed to the point where, you know, there was just someone in charge of telling me what not to do all day long. And I couldn’t enter this room without this key and this person’s permission.

But, ironically, I ended up going there three times and we ended up getting along very well. But when I was going to do my Botánica at their opening of “UltraBaroque” was September 11th or September 12th, like the day after. So, in true form of American culture, I said I would like to just light a few candles, and you know, just make an altar. And they said, Oh, you can’t do that, you can’t light candles, you know, which I understand, but

it's once again how these institutions are becoming so not about art, just about preciousness and dogma. That's dogma.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. Because how can you have an altar without candles? I mean, in terms –

[END OF TAPE 3; BEGIN TAPE 4.]

MS. CORDOVA: – The tradition –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Exactly. And, yes, I know fire is a very scary thing for a museum.

MS. CORDOVA: It is.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: But it's just the idea that it's become, you know, dogma. It's just protection of these precious, sacred objects. And, you know, they've become holy objects that must be protected at all costs. Yes, I understand about lighting the candle, but it's just the way the world has become, where, you know, something that's supposed to be dedicated to beauty and expression has become something sterile and something that should be safe.

And so I came back and gave a lecture, and did the store later on. And I would come into a city and try to get a pulse of what was going on. I think Toronto was my more successful one.

MS. CORDOVA: That was the Pauline Johnson?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, the wedding of Pauline Johnson.

MS. CORDOVA: That sounded great fun.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, that was a real fun piece.

MS. CORDOVA: Is it sort of your policy to try to go to a city in advance and just find out as much as you can?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, I ask really, really frank questions. And it's uncanny how maybe –sometimes, I'm concerned that I'm reading my own agenda into the questions I ask, and that I only want to hear what I want to hear. But it's uncanny how cultures, all over the world, it's this constant class struggle and cultural struggle, and often still based along bloodlines.

Even in Finland, that you would think it was just this –

MS. CORDOVA: Homogeneous?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Homogeneous culture. The majority of the Fins, it's just like San Antonio, are the minority. The brown-skinned Fins speak this language, they don't even know what the origins are, they're the indigenous Fins. And they have potato noses and they're not as pretty as the Swedes. The Swedes make up only 6 percent of the population and have most of the income – I mean the high income. It's pretty socialized, but rich people are often the Swedes.

They're the pretty blonde people, they're the newscasters, they're the models, they're the spokespeople, they're often the politicians; they were the pretty people in the art crowd, they're the architects. Those are the blonde Swedes. And the brown-haired, potato-nosed Fins, although they're 94 percent of the population, are required to learn Swedish. It's one of the two languages.

And so I would ask frank questions like that, and those were taboos. They go, "We don't talk about that," but they look at each other, "but it's true." The Swedes are kind of the snobby ones and they're the rich ones. So, you know, once again it's amazing how even in a culture that you think it could not possibly be an issue, it was just like San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: And so that's what you found when you went to Toronto and –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: In Toronto I found an uncanny parallel between what I was doing and with what Pauline Johnson did. She – her father was a chief – and her mother was a refined white woman, and she passed for white, but she over romanticized and self-exoticized her culture and dressed in Indian-drag, and made a living doing it, which is kind of what I'm doing.

I'm this traveling artist dealing with – I was – my art is shifting, but kind of dealing with issues of cultural promotion and self exoticization.

MS. CORDOVA: This made me think, I mean, and she was writing poems about this, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MS. CORDOVA: And here you are using your installations –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, they're my poems.

MS. CORDOVA: They're your poems.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. And they're exulting, like my Tenochtitlán piece. This new piece I just did called *Giant*, it's exulting and celebrating the virtues of culture of color.

MS. CORDOVA: So is there some negative impact to your work? Because, I mean, she's criticized sometimes, right, for this quality, for romanticizing.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think she is, yes. But I think the criticism probably would not come from the United States, probably Mexicans, Mexican intellectuals would probably criticize me, if anything. Mexican intellectuals are the Mexicans in the high art circles, are part of this international community. They're way too cool to exoticize their own culture.

When I had my 30th birthday, that was very pivotal. So 50 of my Latino friends came and we were all going through this period of hyper-romanticization of our culture. We were singing 1920s romantic Mexican songs and I made these gorgeous artistic dishes. I had huge chicharrones covered with roses. People still talk about it in Mexico City. No one had ever done it like that before.

And all the cool Mexicans and all their white friends from Germany and England were all there, and they were smoking and so dour, you know? And they just thought we were a bunch of, you know, happy, drunk, pochos, you know, desperately trying to be Mexicans. And they were listening, like, to Madonna or something. Do you know what I mean? And drinking American whiskey. We were drinking homemade mescal and – you know, real wannabes. And Sandra was in China Poblana outfit. So it was very ironic, all of that.

But as far as me being criticized about self-exoticization; no, because I'm really trying to venerate authentic working-class Mexican culture. That's what I've really been trying to do in some of my pieces. Like, when I work with the white rococo ladies, I'm saying that's what Mexican grandmothers put in their houses.

And cakes. We didn't have Frida Kahlo alters, we have baroque, cheap cakes from the grocery store.

MS. CORDOVA: Right. And I guess also, maybe, is that you are seeking to sell your goods to a total audience, right? Like, everyone included, including Mexican-Americans.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, right.

MS. CORDOVA: As opposed to just selling it to a white, "other" –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: It's very democratic, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: – and then turning it into this exoticized object for the "Other" to take home.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think so, I think so. You know, and I would talk about that. I would say, I'm being democratic and I'm being tolerant. And some hip, cute kids from Austin are buying the stuff in total kitsch. These grandmothers are buying it in sincerity. These artists are buying it because they think it's beautiful and interesting or provocative.

These hip people from Mexico City are buying it, because it just dawned on them, this is spectacular in the right setting, even though it's something I never would have noticed before. So I'm allowing all of that.

MS. CORDOVA: So how is your Marfa show different from anything you've done before?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: The Marfa show is a funny play, once again, on the series I did that was pretty successful called, "Sell Me Something Brown." And it was written about in *Art in America* – there's another "Sell Me Something Brown" show in Beaumont right now.

MS. CORDOVA: Uh-oh, I think we're – let's get back to that question, because I realize we're just over this tape. So let me stop here.

[Pause for tape change.]

All right, we're back recording, this is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Franco Mondini-Ruiz. This is Session Two and Disc Three.

And, Franco, I just interrupted you as you were talking about Marfa and about how maybe it was different from any other show you had done before.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Um.

MS. CORDOVA: Or not.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, it's not really different. It was definitely like my Bard piece, it was opulent. Because it really had taken five years of curating and collecting to put the pieces in there. It's once again dealing with - more succinctly with a concept that I really haven't brought up in this interview. But one thing that I think I've brought to the table is the issue, not only of multiculturalism, but multiclassism.

Making it clear to Latinos, as well as the dominant Anglo culture, that even within Latino culture there are issues of class. So, like, the "UltraBaroque" show, the show was supposed to be about the mestizaje [ph], the mixtures of the bloodlines and the imperfection of the baroque culture.

There's about two drops of Mexican blood in that show. Five of the artists are European Jews, wealthy Jewish families, they do not have Indian blood. They are acculturated into Latino culture. Some of them are German. Some of them are - you know, I'm one of the most mestizo in the show. And I'm a white boy, almost, from Boerne, Texas. So once again, here's this show celebrating the mestizaje, and it's white, almost pure-blooded white show.

And nobody got offended when I brought it up, but the guys said, yeah, we're rich Jews, we own shovel factories, yeah, we're - you know? But they're the successful artists of Mexico. And they are dealing - they have been acculturated and you know, the people they're doing paintings of are still their maids. They're kind of making fun of their maids and mariachis and all that. Like, hey, you know, "We're hip too, we know how fucking funny this is, and we're making art out of it."

You know, great, it's true, and welcome to the international global art world, and you're talented and you're privileged and you're handsome and you're sensitive. But we are not brown mestizos. So here's this issue again. And we are upper class and almost pure-blooded white Latinos. So, you know, what do we have to say about that? That we are now representing the mestizaje to the world. You know, so it kind of broke my heart, you know. I want some brown people on the circuit. And there are some, but not a whole lot.

And so - what was the question? About the "UltraBaroque," yes. So the issue that I brought up was class, the idea that most of we artists on the multi-cultie circuit are often from upper class, at least from one parent in our parentage, and are often lighter-skinned, if not pure-blooded European.

MS. CORDOVA: But, of course, you used the film *Giant* as a jumping off point, right?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. I used the film *Giant* because it was a Hollywood rendition of something that never happened. And the movie *Giant*, you know, it's happened to some extent, but not really. You know, Rock Hudson's - you know, Elizabeth Taylor's son marries a Mexican woman and they have this papoose-looking baby.

You know, even that, I was thinking, I said, I wonder if Elsa Cardenas, the Mexican actress, was offended because they made that baby so dark and Indian-looking. I would love - I bet you \$10 she was pissed.

[Laughter.]

You know, I'm going to study that. I bet you \$10 she was furious. Because the baby's - it looks like an Eskimo or an Indian baby. But *Giant* was supposed to be about that, oh, the white people became enlightened and Texas finally got wonderful. It never happened.

Marfa is a fascinating thing, too, showing in Marfa, because - look what's happened. The people that are sponsoring Ballroom are white, liberal, Democrat aristocrats and from some of the wealthiest, most important, historical families, and very well intentioned, but they've gotten that colonial payback.

The Chinati Foundation - have I already told you this in this interview?

MS. CORDOVA: We haven't discussed this in these interviews, but -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, okay.

MS. CORDOVA: But it's important to mention.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, it's important. The Chinati Foundation is, you know, Northeastern money and society money and new money, as far as Texas is concerned, and it took over Marfa. And so they're being colonized.

MS. CORDOVA: This is the Donald Judd?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. Donald Judd has now – this Yankee, this white Yankee, nouveau-riche guy has colonized Marfa and the original colonizers that own all the land and got it from the Mexicans, hate it. They're being snubbed and becoming second-class citizens in their own community, so they open "Ballroom." They're going to show them.

You know, so now they know how we felt hundreds of years earlier when they came and all of a sudden somehow owned all our land and all our buildings.

MS. CORDOVA: What a bizarre experience for you to go – to be invited to go into the Ballroom to create an installation.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Well, we're being used. Because that's the only way they can win – beat Chinati at their own game, saying, "We're better than you because we show black people and Mexican people, we won," you know? They don't mean it that crassly, but it's their little way of saying – so, we've become very, very strange political bedfellows.

We're still kind of being used, but at least I've got some money in my pocket and I got to express myself honestly, and we're not invisible anymore. You know, we're seen as a valuable tool to assert themselves, you know? But still, even within the Marfa Foundation, as much they tried to integrate it was still the Mexicans doing all the work, and all the whites going to the party afterwards, for the most part.

But they tried their best, and it's going to still take another 100 or 200 years for all this to finally become utopic. So I just thought that's a very interesting, fascinating post post colonial. The colonizers being colonized and fighting back.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I would feel remiss if I didn't ask you about your *Spurs Installation*, just because I feel like, you know, San Antonio often – it loves the Spurs to a degree, but I just have always come to realize in some ways, I mean, it's so beloved. The team is so beloved. And so of course you created this installation, maybe you could talk about the process of a –

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, definitely.

Well, first of all I owe this to the wonderful Henry Munoz, who has taught me to think less like a Mexican. [Laughs.] I was willing to do the piece for, like, \$2,000. And he said, no. I did it for \$50,000. Yah!

[Laughter.]

Go Spurs.

MS. CORDOVA: Go Spurs.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: They wanted me to do their trophy case, but we only had one trophy, at the time, now we have two. I based the trophy cases on Takashimaya, and they turned out really pretty, very high-end. San Antonio, yes, loves the Spurs. You know, we have a big inferiority complex. We're not Dallas, we're not Houston, and we're not even Austin, you know? It's not spoken, but we're a second-rate city full of Mexicans. That's how I used to read it. So San Antonio is becoming – it's very proud, and it's very civic-minded, it's very patriotic, and it loves teams and all that kind of stuff.

Well, I came up with an idea that I thought would represent the true San Antonio. And I don't know if you've seen the case or not, but it is a collection of objects from about 100 local families of different classes. And a 16-year-old girl that kept a scrapbook from the 70s, black girls with afros in the drill team, Mexican grandmothers doing dunk shots, and those cutouts you can get in New York, I guess at the malls.

A letter written to the Spurs thanking them from an autographed picture for their brother who was dying of cancer and had been the first person – one of the first people to ever visit the Spurs when they were at some auto show, before they were even recognized as a team, and got all their signatures. This prominent surgeon, the mother sent in a T-shirt that the boy had worn out till it had become just like a little halter top, that he had won, like, in some free throw contest.

So I just captured – San Antonio is really a gigantic hometown. Very cluttered, full of sentiment. So most of these items are not of great value, as a matter-of-fact, none of them were. I couldn't really find valuable objects. So they're what people might call kitsch. But what I wanted to show was the diversity of the city, and I didn't want

to depict a team that is supported, like other teams, with, you know, martini-sipping, corporate yuppies and executives, you know. San Antonio is barely at an income level that it can afford a team like this, but it does because it's so dedicated and it's so important to it.

The other thing I did that was very hard was the Rodeo. The Rodeo thought I was the, like, biggest queen they'd ever seen in their lives. They -

MS. CORDOVA: - you had one case for the Spurs and -

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: And one for the Rodeo. And the Rodeo worked with me very, very reluctantly. You know, they couldn't care less. As far as they're concerned, there could have been a bail of hay in there. You know, it was going to be real ugly in San Antonio-style.

The Rodeo let me look through their archives, and they had very little. They also were very, very persnickety with me. They didn't want to show any animals being ridden or anybody with spurs because they were all paranoid about PETA, you know. But they did it in a way that was very alarmist and very difficult for me, and everything was always, "No."

So I borrowed artifacts from the Witte Museum [San Antonio, Texas] that depicted the history of rodeo, from Arabic history, Indian history, Mexican history, black history, female history, and tried to mix all those items in a way that shows that rodeo really is something that's been passed down from - most recently, Mexican culture - and Moorish culture, even before that.

So that piece was kind of a pain because they just thought I was from Mars.

MS. CORDOVA: And you didn't do the - what I understand, for the Spurs you'd sort of been advertising in the paper and got a lot of responses?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes, uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: But that didn't work for the Rodeo?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, because there just wasn't that much stuff available of quality, and they weren't as enthusiastic as the Spurs were. The Spurs had an infrastructure that was enthusiastic. And even then - so I set up a little office and borrowed all these valuables - you know, the signed tortilla, the David Robinson shoes. And it just was wacky.

I also wanted to make Julianna Holt and Peter Holt happy, who were the funders of that project. You know, the million dollars of art in the Spurs arena is because of their generosity and belief in contemporary art. I think Julianna likes the shelves, but she's not real crazy about all the kitsch I use, the pizza and the fake popcorn and the spilled beer cans. But it really does capture San Antonio.

San Antonio was known for having low-class, raunchy fans, you know? And they didn't consider themselves low class, they just considered themselves as working-class people. And, you know, basketball is not that working-class. You know, it's more white collar usually. And we had fans called the "Baseline Bums" that were infamous.

And so, like, I even have an ice chest where they used to sneak in their own beer and stuff like that, in the piece.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I think one of the reasons why I wanted to also ask you about that is just because I also feel like you would love to be back in San Antonio, right? Because there are - but also you're constantly on the road because of other opportunities?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Or would you love to be back in San Antonio?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I would have to control my fascist tendencies in San Antonio. I am no better than Donald Judd. I want to create the city in my view of what the city should look like, and I did it to some extent to Botánica. But I forgot all the negative parts. I forgot the people that were jealous, the people that were mean, the people that stole from me, the promises I didn't keep because I kept too many - you know, all the money I owed to all the different people, the pettiness; all of that I forgot, you know. [Laughs.]

I was just telling you the flowery parts of it. It's a tough town. In the few weeks of spring it's full of promise, and these cactus flowers all bloom and everything's in bloom and it's just full of promise. And then this heat wave hits and just staying alive is difficult. And because of that, that is why the city has, I think, retained so much of its charm. It's not a city of Manifest Destiny, it is a city of just living for the day.

But there's so many crimes committed here that I would just become a zealot, unless I become more mature and diplomatic and persuasive in a way that maybe I can make a difference, such as like Robert Hugman did, who started the Riverwalk. But so many people have tried to make such great differences here and been thrown out of this town.

Robert Tobin was one of the top philanthropists we could have ever had. He had bazillions of dollars to spend in improving San Antonio and insisted and begged for UTSA campus to be moved downtown. That would have allowed all of the historical buildings – that eventually got all torn down into parking lots – to be turned into campus buildings. And it would have made the city vibrant and cosmopolitan and youthful.

It would have allowed the majority of the city's Latinos to be in close proximity to the university. Of course it went to rich, white landowners in the North Side. And it was also built that, one, if the university failed it could be turned into a prison, and secondly, it was not put downtown because of fear of future racial riots and college riots. So they wanted to put it out in the country where – there were some of the rationalizations for keeping out there.

And second, you know, we're a city of 1.2 million people and the UT system only decided to give us a university 30-years-ago, while UT Austin really was the free university for all the prep boy – blonde, prep boys and sorority girls of the good families of Texas. I'm very bitter about that. And that has set the city behind about 100 years.

MS. CORDOVA: I think that's a fair criticism. [Laughter.] And so actually, I guess, really I have maybe one or two questions for you, and that would really be it for me and then maybe we can wrap up with some of your thoughts.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Sure, okay.

MS. CORDOVA: But you're working on a project right now from the Alameda, and I don't know if you want to talk about that at all? But maybe more important is this – the Rome Prize [American Academy in Rome] that you just received.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Oh yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And this is really a life-changing situation for you.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think so.

MS. CORDOVA: So you're at a crossroads, perhaps?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I am at a crossroads. I feel like about two or three weeks ago I started a new five-year cycle of my life. Every five years my life has changed. The last five years were the New York years, the five years before that were the Infinito years, the five before that were the USAA, yuppie years, the five before that were becoming a lawyer, becoming gay-years, then law school and then college and then high school and then junior high, elementary and being a toddler.

[Laughter.]

Every five years I've changed.

MS. CORDOVA: I can see that.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah. And this is – the next five years is going to be my European years, and I hope I become a wiser person. Now, if I were wiser I probably wouldn't have said such frank things about my friends. But I think for posterity reasons I just want to discuss some of the little decisions and intricacies and pain that goes on between mentors and mentees and friends, and evolving as an artist, and what it took.

So if I badmouthed anyone, I apologize. I've got to tell you something. A long time ago I read some novel where anyone who has hurt you, you should write their name on a piece of paper, and put it like in a desk drawer where no one can see it. And every day open that desk drawer and look at the list of all the people that have truly hurt you and thank them, because they're the ones that really have made you a success. And it's so true. They're the ones that allowed you to grow and challenge yourself.

MS. CORDOVA: There's some scary truth to that.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: There really is. And a lot of the people that have been nice to you are probably the ones that fucked your life up.

[Laughter.]

My favorite friends, you know, are the reasons for all my woes.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, we really have a, you know, be mad at those nice people –

[Laughter.]

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Yeah, and all the people that you really love and made your life so enjoyable, yeah, you have to curse them for really causing all the real problems in your life.

So the next five years now, God, I hope my health stays up. And I hope I'm not just trying – I hope it's not even bragging saying I want to grow and get rid of all my material possessions. I hope I'm not being a showoff doing that, but it's sincerely where I am right now. And I'm excited to see where that's going to take me. You know, I'm looking forward to the – I hope Europeans like me, you know.

I don't know yet.

MS. CORDOVA: Is it going to be another Mexico City experience?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: No, no. I don't have anger anymore. Plus being sick lowered my testosterone level, and I think that has made me a gentler person. I don't have that – [growls] – like thrust, you know, to force my way to get things immediately.

MS. CORDOVA: So do you think being sick has also made you more driven to get things done?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Not anymore. For a while I was panic-stricken and I wanted to be somebody, but I am very happy where I am, you know. I accomplished things that were beyond – not beyond my dreams, but that I had hoped would happen, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, that's great. Is there anything else – should we end there?

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: I think we should end there. I just want to thank my, you know, the people in my life. My friends, my parents. Alejandro Diaz, who I was very frank about, but I owe so much to him and so much to Julia Herzberg and my gallerist, and all those other people that hurt me so bad and made me tough.

[Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right. Well, with that, Franco, thank you so much, and I'm going to stop our tape.

MR. MONDINI-RUIZ: Thank you. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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